Conflict in Action

Instead of struggling to erase negative emotions, we can learn to use them in positive ways.... Rather than work against ourselves all we need to do in many cases is to point our weaknesses or unpleasant tendencies in a different direction than we have been. (Hoff, 1982, p. 59)

Conflict can be expensive. Organizationally, costs include low morale, high employee turnover, and loss of productive work time. Personally, costs often involve loss of sleep, loss of motivation, and damage to relationships. Too often, damage occurs when people are out of control. Later, it is common to hear someone lament, “I wish I hadn’t said that. I don’t know what came over me.”

At times, the damage that conflict causes is unrepairable. Recently, a company vice president exploded in anger at members of his staff and at a fellow vice president. He spent months trying to smooth over the damage. The human resource director said, “Despite all of his efforts, the damage is not repairable. He can’t fix the loss of confidence and trust from his staff.”

Conflict in American culture is seen in a variety of new settings:

- Computer chat room—People can now argue on-line with other people whom they have never met.
- Voice mail—Customers become frustrated as they navigate their way through a series of menu directions.
- Public schools—Students engage in violence as an answer to their problems.
- Freeways—Drivers engage in road rage as a way to manage crowded freeways.
- Public buildings—Public servants become the target for unhappy community members.
- Office settings—Frustrated employees express their anger in outbursts against coworkers.
A good beginning for preventing or managing conflict involves understanding the many sources of conflict and the kinds of events that escalate conflict. In addition, it is useful to identify and understand the conditions that lead up to unresolvable conflict. The options become more limited as disputants move from disagreement to polarization of positions and the use of destructive tactics.

**Sources of Conflict**

Identifying underlying issues that fuel bad feelings and damage relationships is one of the central tasks for resolving conflict. Conflict resists resolution when one party fails to address the issues of most significance for other parties. When we are not addressing the agenda most relevant to other parties, we will hear statements such as, "You're not hearing me," or "You don't care about my concerns." Scott (1990) explains, "Unless these basic [underlying] needs and wants are identified and dealt with, the conflict will probably continue along with growing frustrations. . . . These needs and wants dictate a person's reaction (or lack thereof) to a situation" (p. 70). For example, when a housewife who wants respect from her husband hears that bringing home a paycheck demonstrates love for his family, she does not feel heard and will resist cooperation. She wants equal value placed on her contributions to the home. By focusing our efforts on the issues of immediate concern first, we can best use our energy for resolving conflict.

The many sources for conflict suggest why it is so difficult for parties to be focused on the same issue. Figure 2.1 lists the most common sources of conflict. Each of the sources may affect the others. For example, a poor relationship may influence respect that one party has for the other's role. A power imbalance may create a need for procedures that weaker parties believe are fair.

*Data*—People often have differences of opinion about the best source, reliability, or interpretation of data. Do the facts suggest that the earth's ozone layer is being depleted, or are we in a temporary cycle? Disputes about contractual, environmental, or physical loss or reimbursement for damages often require objective standards or interpretation by neutral third parties to resolve disagreement.

*Interests*—Specific, tangible wants or perceived needs are the most common source of disagreement. Disputes such as divorce settlements, work agreements, or organizational policies frequently involve stipulations about how specific interests of all parties will be met.

*Procedures*—Parties may not engage in discussion if they do not agree with a way to solve a problem, make a decision, or resolve conflict. People abide by election results because they believe that election procedures are fair. People abide by a court's decision because the trial followed a predictable process.
Conflicts in Action

Figure 2.1. Sources of Conflict

**Values**—Frequently, the hardest conflicts to resolve involve differences of opinion about the importance or priority of interests, options, or choices of direction. Do the children belong with the father or the mother? Should industry be allowed to clear timberland to do mining? Problems such as these begin with a value about the way things should be.

**Relationships**—People may resist cooperating if they do not trust others, do not feel respected by others, do not believe that the other person is honest, or do not feel listened to. Collaboration often begins by establishing a relationship with a high comfort level.

**Roles**—Professional, community, or family roles often create conflict because of expectations for the role or power imbalances created by the role. For example, negotiation between a supervisor and an employee can be difficult if the employee believes that his or her lack of power prevents any worthwhile discussions.

**Communication**—Conflict frequently results from how something is said. It is common to hear, “I know you said that. I wish I had a tape recording of it.” In addition, people’s emotions become triggered by words that another takes personally or interprets as threatening. Or, parties in a dispute may become angry because some information that they believe is relevant is not shared.

Box 2.1 reviews a conflict between the owner of a small pet store, Gary, and the management group of a small shopping center. The conflict illustrates differences in perceptions about appropriate procedures for decision making, values
Some studies suggest that there are more conflicts between groups than between individuals (Komorita & Lapworth, 1982; McCallum et al., 1985). There are many factors that promote these kinds of conflicts. One of these is a phenomenon called ethnocentrism. This factor explains a group’s tendency to favor group perceptions, values, and aspirations, and to derogate these factors in other groups. For example, management will speak of employee unwillingness to consider corporate realities, and employees will complain that management lacks appreciation for their contributions. The stronger the group’s identity and the lower the chance that members will go to the other group, the stronger the ethnocentrism.

A strong group identity strengthens the resolve of group members to achieve the group’s aspirations. They will become positional as interest and goals become the agenda for a common cause. Group identity fosters a perception of fraternalistic deprivation, the sense that members have been treated unfairly by other groups. The group develops a common goal of defeating the enemy.

For example, employees in a contract negotiation may begin asking for changes in work rules. As discussion proceeds, they become more entrenched until they reach the level of cause. They develop a shared vision that might be labeled “fighting the injustice of worker conditions created by management.” Causes reflect polarizations created by lack of listening and a perception that one side lacks respect for the other side’s perspective.

A third factor, enhanced by group cohesiveness and shared identity, involves runaway norms (Raven & Rubin, 1983). The group conforms to patterns of behavior that seem normal to members but appear contentious and polarizing to others. The norms become justification for heightened distrust and insults directed at other groups. As the behaviors produce reciprocal behaviors in the other groups, a negative conflict spiral evolves.

Occasionally, negotiating settlements between groups in conflict begins by clarifying inaccurate assumptions that group members make about each other. It begins by identifying common ground and promoting behavioral norms that contribute to a collaborative climate. Rubin et al. (1994) suggest that breaking up cohesive groups for the purpose of problem solving can reduce collective dissent. For example, resolution of an environmental problem may involve breaking up a large, contentious group into subgroup task forces. A mediator may want to break up an employee group into two or three problem-solving subgroups to reduce the influence of divisive leaders.

Frozen Conflicts

On October 3, 1997, 1,000 steelworkers walked off their jobs at C F & I Steel Mill in Pueblo, Colorado. On this same date 1 year later, 800 of the workers still refused to return to work. Union president Ernest Hernandez said, “After 12
months, we're winning the financial battle. Sooner or later, the shareholders will have to bring an end to this and tell the company it has to bring its workers back" ("No end for steel strike," 1998, p. 4B). Michael Lowry, a stock analyst with Black & Company, disagreed with labor. In his estimation, the strike had little or no effect on the steel mill. University of Southern Colorado management professor James Browne agreed, pointing out that labor overestimated the damage they could do. As late as October 1999, the strike continued. The situation meets the criteria for a genuine impasse.

Keltner (1987) lists conditions that suggest intractable or frozen struggles. These are struggles in which resolution of differences is unlikely and deescalation is difficult:

- Rigid and unchanging perceptions of differing interests
- Incompatible values
- Communication that is poor or nonexistent
- Parties that perceive the situation as win-lose and move only to positions that give them advantage over the others
- Rigid and unchanging perceptions of self in relation to the rest of the world (p. 170)

Examples of intractable or frozen conflicts include the Cold War between the U.S. and former Soviet Union, the conflict between Irish Catholics and Protestant Unionists, or the long-term hostilities among nations of the Middle East.

When struggles become frozen, collaborative discussion and problem solving become increasingly more challenging. In the steel strike, all parties lose as the strike goes on. Rail customers complain of substandard bailing wire produced in the plant. Shipments from the plant are down 23% for the quarter. For 6 months, the steel mill was unable to get more credit through refinancing its loans. Striking employees live at a poverty level. Many lack health insurance. Each side appears solidly frozen in its position.

Northrup (1989) formulated a theory about stages through which disputants go before they reach the frozen position described by Keltner:

1. A strong sense of threat to a group's central commitments
2. The distortion of one another's positions because of the threat
3. A hardening of positions so that central assumptions about conflict become fixed for both parties
4. The development of fixed patterns of response that assume the conflict as a central and ongoing fact

Once the conflict reaches the fourth stage of development, agreement becomes very difficult to achieve.

Osgood (1962) suggests that moving away from frozen positions may begin with gradual and reciprocal conciliatory initiatives designed to reduce tension and build trust. The late Egyptian president Anwar Sadat used this technique when
he flew to Jerusalem in 1977 prior to the 1978 Camp David Peace Accord meetings. In labor disputes, parties use this technique when they agree to relax a demand as a conciliatory gesture. "The aim of such initiatives is to enhance the trust of others to the point where productive communication and cooperation can begin" (Rubin et al., 1994, p. 163).

When open discussion meets intense resistance, resolving frozen conflicts could be approached through covert problem solving. This process involves disputants negotiating their differences through intermediaries in private sessions. Because intermediaries possess no power to make commitments and no need to engage in energy-consuming positional posturing, they can devote time to considering "supposals," or potential solutions to ending a stalemate. During the 1978 Camp David meetings, President Jimmy Carter shuttled back and forth between Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin and Sadat’s cottages with supposals that eventually became the framework for a negotiated settlement.

**Collaborative Approach to Resolving Conflict**

Collaboration involves people working together for solutions that maximize the gains for all parties in the conflict. Approaching conflict from the perspective of collaboration depends on a fundamental, underlying principle identified by Chrislip and Larson (1994): "implicit trust that diverse people engaged in constructive ways and provided with the necessary information to make good decisions can be relied upon to create appropriate answers to the most pressing problems" (p. 14). This perspective is a profound shift for a competitive culture in which so many use intimidation, coercion, and litigation to force their way over others. Forcing may achieve partial success, but usually at high cost. Competitive strategies fail to address the long-term, underlying needs of relationships, organizations, or communities.

The following examples illustrate just a few of the many settings in which collaborative problem solving fuels innovative ways to manage conflict.

Toyota’s U.S. subsidiary established a problem-solving process that it called the Reversal Arbitration Board to handle disputes between the company and its dealers. The program reduced the number from a high of 178 in 1985 to a low of 3 in 1992 (Carver & Vondra, 1994).

More than a dozen Massachusetts school communities developed teacher contracts and school policies through collaborative, interest-based bargaining. To date, the benefits of this nonadversarial approach include stronger teacher-administration relationships, higher quality contracts, and a better image in the community (Peace, 1994).

In Ottawa, Canadian police, trained in facilitation, conducted community meetings designed to foster dialogue and creative brainstorming about fundamental causes and solutions to neighborhood crime (Hargrove, 1998).
Negotiation

In a situation where there is a chance for agreement, the way you negotiate can make a difference between coming to terms or not, or between an outcome that you find favorable and one that is merely acceptable. (Fisher, Ury, & Patton, 1993, p. 4)

Collaboration comes from two Latin roots—camin and laborare—which mean "to work together." It refers to the way people connect with one another, the way they work together in a mutually beneficial manner. Negotiation is the process that creates and fuels collaboration. Keltner (1987) refers to negotiation as a "peaceful procedure which reconciles and/or compromises differences and which depends on good faith and flexibility" (p. 68). It is the process that shapes United Nations agreements, that enabled Israel and Egypt at Camp David to end a centuries-old feud, and that enables people to live and work together harmoniously.

Negotiation is as much about a state of mind as it is a strategic choice for managing problems. Integrative negotiation is a constructive, problem-solving process, the goal of which is to maximize interests of both parties while protecting the relationship. Disputants who choose to negotiate begin in a spirit of cooperation and a climate of respect. Through the exchanging of information, they identify shared problems and interests. An attitude of integrative negotiation differs from bargaining (distributive negotiation) by the impact each has on disputants. The bargainer seeks to achieve goals at the expense of the other, plays games in order to gain an advantage in the processes, and coexists through demands or threats. A negotiator seeks to achieve a goal compatible with the goal of others and rarely uses threats or demands.

The bargainer approaches the resolution of differences or conflict with a different mind-set. He or she views issues with a narrow perspective and regards outcomes as fixed goals. The approach is positional, rigid, and insensitive to the interests of others. For example, in a mediation between teachers and adminis-
tration in a public school, one of the teachers began the first meeting with a statement of her interests: "There is only one satisfactory solution to these problems, and that is to replace the administrators." Frequently, as in this situation, bargainers escalate conflict through personal attacks meant to weaken or neutralize competing interests. Bazerman and Neale (1992) call this mind-set the *mythical fixed pie*, where the bargainer sees a finite set of resources for which everyone must compete.

Integrative negotiation approaches conflict as a joint venture, an opportunity for mutual gain. Rubin (1991) describes this perspective as "enlightened self interest," where both parties see that it is in their best interests to help others achieve their goals (p. 4). Conflict is approached with an attitude of creativity (asking a lot of "what if?" questions) and flexibility (looking for mutually beneficial trade-offs). In the school conflict described above, the mediator’s response was, "Could we first look at the underlying issues that cause you to feel this way?" The angry teacher responded, "But the problem is the leadership." The mediator countered, "If we change the administration, you may get new administrators who do many of the same things you don’t like. Wouldn’t we be ahead by addressing the problems that make you unhappy?" The teacher agreed. Integrative negotiation seeks to build collaborative discussion so that in addition to meeting needs or interests, a process is created for resolving further problems. The goal is dialogue with mutually satisfying outcomes. Table 3.1 summarizes the differences between integrative and distributive negotiation.

**Negotiation—A Good Option**

Fisher and Ury (1981, pp. 4-6) point out that there are some good reasons for strategically choosing the mutual gains approach over the more competitive distributive approach:

1. Arguing over positions produces unwise agreements.
2. Arguing over positions is inefficient.
3. Arguing over positions endangers the ongoing relationship.

Strauss (1993) believes that the cultural trend toward win-win approaches is due to a phenomenon called *lateralization of power*. Issues are becoming more complex, authority is more distrusted or questioned, and there are more advocacy groups to support individuals who believe that they have not been treated fairly. Groups have greater capacity to block the plans of leaders or make decision making more difficult. Consensus-based, win-win discussions lateralize power between individuals or across organizations.
Table 3.1 Comparison Between Integrative and Distributive Negotiation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Integrative</th>
<th>Distributive</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Collaborative</td>
<td>Competitive</td>
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<td>Interest-focused discussion</td>
<td>Positional discussion</td>
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<tr>
<td>Problem solving</td>
<td>Forcing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Arguments based on merit</td>
<td>Bluff and intimidation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Valuing others</td>
<td>Devaluing of others</td>
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<tr>
<td>Win-win attitude</td>
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<td>Information sharing</td>
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<td>Joint gains</td>
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<tr>
<td>Empathy and understanding</td>
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<tr>
<td>Joint interests</td>
<td>Self-interests</td>
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<tr>
<td>Power shared</td>
<td>Power over others</td>
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The Negotiation Process

Table 3.2 lists the phases of a negotiation process. Effective negotiation depends on the ability of parties early in the discussions to share a lot of information about needs, issues, and interests. Packages of trade-offs that meet all parties’ needs depend on a high level of information sharing. Creativity and flexibility of parties generally produce the most enduring settlements.

Because negotiation reflects an attitude with which one approaches conflict, there must be core values or principles that characterize the perspective. Fisher and Ury (1981) provide insight about these in their discussion of core principles.

1. **Separate the people from the problem.** Blaming diverts energy from problem solving. Focusing on people polarizes and fuels face-saving behaviors and the need to resort to bargaining to equalize power. As people feel attacked, they build defensive walls that resist cooperation.

2. **Focus on interests, not positions.** Positions occur in statements such as, “Here’s where I stand on this problem.” It is difficult to persuade others to change positions. Instead, the goal should be to direct discussion toward the underlying concerns, needs, fears, and interests. To identify the underlying concerns, ask “Why?” “What leads you to say that?” or “What do you need?”

3. **Invent options for mutual gain.** Lax and Sebenius (1986) distinguish between creating and claiming value. Creating value involves sharing information so that disputants can develop trust, have as much information on the table as possible in order to create new possibilities, and discover trade-offs for mutual gain. Claiming value involves demands, exaggerations, minimizing the claims of others, and strategically concealing information. “Value creators see the essence of negotiating as expanding the pie. . . . This is aided by openness, clear communication, sharing information, creativity, an attitude of joint problem solving and cultivating common interests” (Lax & Sebenius, 1986, p. 37).
Table 3.2 Mutual Gains Negotiation Process

1. Get commitment to negotiate.
2. In prenegotiation, assess costs of no settlement.
3. Begin with an agreement on a definition of the problem.
4. Identify interests, concerns, and goals of all parties.
5. Discuss the most important issues first.
7. Create packages that maximize gains for all parties.
8. Evaluate the costs and benefits of the packages.
9. Agree on a plan for implementation.
10. Formalize the agreement.

4. *Insist on using objective criteria.* If disputants can agree on objective, technical, or commonly accepted standards, there is less room for argument about what is fair. Used-car shopping involves Blue Book values, and house buying involves fair market value. In Human Resources, someone might ask, “What are the expectations of similar positions in other companies?” In a neighborhood dispute, the mediator might ask how similar problems were settled in other communities.

**Factors That Promote Mutual Gains in Negotiation**

Scholars agree on many of the behaviors that move negotiations on constructive paths for resolving disputes. The first strategy is the need to **build trust and share information**. Kimmel, Pruitt, Magenau, Konar-Goldband, and Carnevale (1980) found that when people trust each other, they are less likely to engage in positional statements and threats. People are more likely to share information or express openness to trade-offs if trust is present. In a study that sampled opinions of 351 attorneys, Williams (1983) found that the most effective negotiators demonstrated cooperative patterns that include courteous and personable behavior, willingness to share information, statements with a realistic opening position, and the absence of threats.

Shapiro, Shepherd, and Cheraskin (1982) propose that trust in business negotiations occurs on three levels. The lowest level of trust is **deterrence**. Each party agrees to make small commitments. There are penalties for failure to live up to commitments. For example, in an environmental negotiation, trust in an agreement may depend on achieving reduction of toxic emissions with agreed-upon fines for failure to achieve goals. The second level of trust is based on **knowledge**. Disputants grow to trust each other as information is shared, uncertainties are resolved, or expectations and goals are explained. In workplace dis-