Conflict: Sources and Solutions

How do I:
✓ Deal with unresolved anger in a constructive way?
✓ Identify the source of conflict as it’s occurring?
✓ Understand what my natural conflict style is and know which strategy to adopt in a conflict situation?
✓ Change my attitude toward conflict and treat it as a normal and potentially beneficial part of relationships?
✓ Prevent conflict when appropriate?
✓ Learn how to manage conflict personally and professionally?

I am so angry with my boss I can’t even speak to him. We had always been pretty close. Only a few years older than me, he was a member of my fraternity when he was in college. We met at a chapter career networking event. He said I would fit right in at the investment bank where he worked and that hired me as I graduated from college. For the first few years he was always there for me. I was placed in another department, but he stayed in touch, providing me informally with information and tips. People knew that we were close, and I have to admit I didn’t mind being affiliated with him in people’s heads. As his stature and reputation at the bank grew, I felt lucky and proud to have been taken under his wing. Don’t get me wrong. I worked hard and earned my promotions on merit. But it didn’t hurt to be associated with him and to get useful advice from him. At least, not until now.

Last year he was placed in charge of all campus recruiting for the bank. He was the senior person in charge, and people in all departments who recruited for the bank, like me, had a dotted line reporting relationship to him for our recruiting results. That’s where things began to go wrong.

As soon as he was put in charge, he made me his lieutenant. I worked closely with him to ensure his strategic recruiting objectives would be implemented. I began to travel extensively with him and with the other recruiters, line people like myself who had been “lent” to the function for just one season. It was an honor to be selected. The opportunity to recruit at top-tier campuses is only offered to people who are “up and comers” at the bank. I was proud of his belief that I could contribute to the effort and do a good job. Plus the added visibility couldn’t hurt when it came time for my next bonus and promotion. Or could it?

One night after our firm’s presentation at a top-tier school, he and I ended up the only recruiters left at the bar from our team of eight. Everyone else had retired for the
evening. We were the diehards, left with a group of students who didn’t seem to want to leave. I noticed my boss, Bob, over in a corner of the bar with one of the students. A female student. Uh-oh. I was worried how this might look and thought I’d better saunter over and join in. I got there just in time to hear the student, who sounded like she had already had enough to drink, order a drink whose name I hadn’t heard since back in college on spring break in Florida. Bob told the waiter to charge it to his room. He also politely told me to scam. I left, slightly worried about what might be happening but figuring he knew how to handle himself.

To make a very long story short, a few weeks later, I found out that Bob had propositioned this student and that she had filed a complaint against him, and by association, against me and our firm’s entire recruiting team. Apparently she thinks it was wrong of us to have sent the wrong signal to the students by staying out so late with them. She says she stayed because she thought we were interested in her as a potential hire. And that one of the reasons she didn’t get invited back (for an interview the next day) is she refused to sleep with Bob.

Now both Bob’s job and mine are on the line. Since he’s the senior person in charge of recruiting and the one who made the pass, he’s almost certain to lose his job. And since I’m his lieutenant, I’m vulnerable too. The rest of the team will probably get reassigned.

I am so angry I can’t even talk to anyone about this. Not him. Not his boss. Not my fiancee. Not human resources. It’s humiliating, childish, and shouldn’t be involving me. All my hard work at the bank is about to go down the tubes. I’m so angry. I thought we were friends. I thought he would look out for me, not get me in trouble. I don’t know what to do. I just want this all to go away.

1. Is this a solvable conflict? Why or why not?
2. By choosing not to speak to his boss or boss’s boss, what impact does this have on the parties involved?
3. What options are available, assuming a resolution is desired?
4. While the bar scenario might not have been predicted or avoided, in what ways could the boss–subordinate conflict have been ameliorated before it progressed to this point?
5. What role do personal style and comfort with conflict play in our response (and resolution) to situations like these?

We’re told that conflict is inevitable, that it’s part of human nature to have conflicts with others. Yet seldom do we as human beings get comfortable with conflict. Many of us would prefer to avoid it at all costs. As we can see from the opening case, avoiding it doesn’t make it go away. It bothers us emotionally whether we confront the source of the conflict or not. Managing conflict is one of the toughest yet most rewarding skills to acquire. Foremost, it is a skill that does not come naturally; it is learned. In this chapter we discuss conflict, what it is, and why learning to manage it is important. We discuss common sources of conflict and present a model for approaching conflict. We also include strategies and tips for dealing with conflict as well as suggestions for preventing conflict when possible and for being selective about which conflicts you choose to tackle. Exercises to help you process and build skills in managing conflict are at the end of the chapter, as is a list of references for further exploration.

“Speaking without thinking is like shooting without aiming.”

Ancient Proverb

What Is Conflict?

Conflict is any situation in which there are incompatible goals, cognitions, or emotions within or between individuals or groups that lead to opposition or antagonistic interaction.
It is the struggle between incompatible and opposing needs, wishes, ideas, interests, or people. Conflict is a form of interaction among parties who differ in interests, perceptions, goals, values, or approaches to problems. Conflict arises when we begin to feel that the other person is interfering with our ability to attain a certain objective. It begins when we believe the other party is interfering or standing in the way of something we want to take, an idea we want to pursue, or a belief we hold. Conflicts may involve individual or group disagreements, struggles, disputes, quarrels, or even physical fighting and wars. Because human beings are unique—possessing a variety of physical, intellectual, emotional, economic, and social differences—conflict is inevitable. Conflict is also a fact of life in all types of organizations. Each organization is composed of people, and each person has a set of goals that is likely to be distinct from the goals of others in the organization. When individuals with different interests compete for the same resource pool, dissension is sure to follow. That tension can be dealt with constructively, in a way that stimulates creativity and positive change. In fact, lack of creative tension sometimes reflects an “I don’t care” attitude that can lead to stagnation on the job. Effective managers are not afraid of conflict. They have been trained to deal with conflict and have trained their employees to deal with conflict constructively. They accept that conflicts must be faced and strive to find constructive means to manage them. Effective managers are those who are selective as to which conflicts they choose to pursue. Sometimes the best course of action in a difficult situation is to take “the path with least resistance”—to be silent!

Although managerial mistakes do sometimes cause unnecessary and even unhealthy conflict, it is important to discard the traditional notion that conflict automatically means one performs ineffectively. Conflict is a certainty for any manager, or any person, for that matter. The best managers recognize this and learn how to manage conflict in such a way that it has positive and fair outcomes for all involved.³

### Why Is Conflict Management Important?

Conflict is a normal part of organizational life. In every organization, family, relationship, and community, there are conflicts of ideas, values, thought, and actions. Conflict is
a given. What isn’t given is how we choose to react to conflict. As Marcus Aurelius says in Meditations:

_If you are distressed by anything external, the pain is not due to the thing itself, but to your own estimate of it; and this you have the power to revoke at any moment._

We can successfully face and resolve conflicts if we take a few steps: recognize conflicts are normal and inevitable, train ourselves not to overreact when conflicts arise, and have a strategy to use when conflicts—some of which are predictable—arise. Conflict can be either positive or negative. The outcomes of conflict depend on how the conflict is managed or resolved. **Positive conflict** is functional and supports or benefits the organization or person’s main objectives. Conflict is constructive when it leads to better decisions, creativity, and innovative solutions to long-standing problems. Conflict is viewed as positive when it results in:

- **Increased Involvement**—Organizational members have the opportunity to develop goals, share ideas, and voice opinions, gaining greater insight into others and situations.
- **Increased Cohesion**—Members build strong bonds from learning how to resolve differences; “if we can survive this, we must have a true relationship” embodies this benefit of conflict. In some cases conflict initially reduces cohesion that can in turn reduce the likelihood of “group think” occurring. In this case conflict is positive.
- **Increased Innovation and Creativity**—Members are encouraged to “put their ideas on the table”; this can lead to more discoveries, improvements, and creative solutions. “Two heads are truly better than one” when conflict brings about synergy instead of chaos.
- **Positive Personal Growth and Change**—Individuals learn their strengths and weaknesses; conflict of ideas challenges individuals to learn and grow by expressing their ideas and thoughts through self-disclosure and sharing of important concepts with others.
- **Clarification of Key Issues**—Through discussion, members reduce ambiguity and focus energy on the real sources of conflict, then work together to target remaining issues that need to be addressed.
- **Values Clarification**—Members clarify who they are and what they stand for, understand who the other party is and what his or her values are, and learn when to sublimate personal interests to the larger needs of the group or organization.

**Negative conflict** is dysfunctional and hinders the organization’s or the person’s performance or ability to attain goals or objectives. Conflict is destructive when it leads to stress and anxiety, inability to take action, and loss of esteem or purpose. Conflict is viewed as negative when it results in:

- **Unresolved Anger**—Members leave the interaction believing they have legitimate concerns that have not been addressed appropriately or goals that cannot be achieved; companies can be slowly poisoned by anger and hostility.
- **Personality Clashes**—Members lack understanding of their style differences and how to work cooperatively and are more tied to their own interests than those of others.
- **Low Self-esteem or Self-confidence**—Members have a diminished sense of self-worth or identity as a result of the conflict. Often this results from impulsive things said or done in the heat of the conflict.
- **Unclear or Opposing Views on Who Is or Should Be Responsible for What**—Members have different expectations of each other and their roles; the conflict was unresolved, unproductive, or ended too soon, leaving ambiguity in its wake.
- **Problems of Efficiency**—Members decide they are unwilling or unable to work together, resulting in redundancies and poor use of existing resources.
- **“Unfinished Business”**—Members are still unclear about the issue or have remaining concerns that will get in the way of being able to move forward.

The benefits of positive conflict far outweigh the time it takes to manage conflict well. As managers, it is our responsibility to learn how to manage conflict effectively and how to help others manage conflict. This is done by creating a climate and culture at work that support constructive conflict—encouraging the clash of ideas (not personalities) and developing processes, training, and tools that help people work through their inevitable
differences with each other. This requires a collaborative approach and a commitment to eliminating or at least reducing the occurrence of destructive conflicts.

Sources of Interpersonal Conflict

Not everyone within a group or organization will have the same goals and objectives. By definition, different groups, business units, functions, operating companies, or locations within one organization will each have a set of expectations and operating principles that differs from the others. Each specific entity within an organization may have a unique customer set, employee profile, product orientation, management style, business niche, set of tasks and procedures, and culture or work environment. Business units in the same organization differ significantly in such areas as primary role, task assignments, workloads, vacation scheduling, pay or promotion policies, chain of command, work flow process, and others. For example, within General Motors are very different entities—separate organizations whose primary business is financing (cars and homes), production (building or assembling cars), sales and service (dealership and warranty organizations), and research and development (making continuous improvement on existing car lines as well as developing new ones such as GM’s electric vehicle). Employees in these different units likely work together, sharing expertise as well as information. A variety of situational or organizational factors lead to conflict.10

Limited Resources

Despite clear differences between units within an organization, one commonality remains. In general, all are vying for the same resource pool. This pool is usually limited, causing the various units within an organization to compete against each other for finite resources. No matter how prosperous an organization might appear from its facilities, salary levels, or private jets and limousines, few if any organizations have infinite resources. This usually results in competition among business units for the restricted resources available through the parent organization. People in organizations compete for what they consider to be their fair share of resources such as money, time, senior management attention, technology, supplies, equipment, and human talent. This inevitably results in conflict.

Differences in Goals/Objectives

A common source of conflict within organizations is differences in personal and/or professional goals and objectives. If we are working on a project with someone whose objective is different from ours, tension or conflict is likely to occur. For example, perhaps one team member wants to “coast” or do as little work as possible toward the team’s expected output or deliverable. If this person is on a team of individuals who are committed to a high-quality output, there will be differences between them on a host of items, such as approach to the work, ways to get the work done, and standards of work quality and quantity. This tension can be from intragroup conflict, differences between members of one group, or from intergroup conflict, differences between competing subgroups of an organization. For example, the marketing department might have a different goal than the finance department. Marketing folks might push to increase spending on advertising and promotion in order to improve sales, while finance folks push for increased cost-cutting efforts.

Miscommunication

Many times, personal and professional conflicts arise due to poor communication. Seldom is miscommunication intentional. More often than not, it’s the result of our not taking time to clarify our understanding of something, or gender or cultural differences, or errors in semantics. Often we say one thing and mean another. Or in our haste, we will speak quickly and cryptically in hopes that others know what we want. Or perhaps we speak clearly but our nonverbal communication contradicts the verbal message. In any case, misunderstanding is likely to occur. These communication issues are further
compounded by the jargon shared by and understood within specific groups of people, such as engineers and military personnel. The processes and principles of communication may also differ between work groups. For example, one group might have a division newsletter, through which employees are kept informed of important organizational changes, while another group might rely on word of mouth to spread key bits of information. This results in each group having a very different understanding of what’s going on in the organization. Interaction between these groups could lead to numerous miscommunications, each one a potential source of conflict.

Many conflicts are the result of differences in attitudes, values, and perceptions. Sometimes, without even realizing it, we bring feelings or concerns into an interaction that predisposes us to react in a certain way. For example, if you are afraid of dogs and encounter a neighbor with a dog while out walking one morning, you may react with fear or even hostility. Upon reflection, you realize this fear is due to a fear of animals you’ve had since you were a child. But the neighbor, without knowing this background, might misinterpret your strong reaction and conclude you dislike the neighbor rather than fear the dog. Without a chance to communicate—for the neighbor to share his or her perception with you and for you to explain the background behind your reaction—it is likely that you will each emerge from the interaction with a vastly different understanding of what just occurred, and with different, possibly negative, opinions of each other.

Conflicting values are a common and difficult-to-resolve source of conflict between people. Differences in religious beliefs, attitudes towards diverse others, clashes in family values, or in work ethic might result in interpersonal differences that surface in the work environment. For example, a young consultant who must leave work by Friday afternoon is viewed by her colleagues as a slacker when they are left to work late on a deliverable. The fact is she is an Orthodox Jew. Her manager knows this but her colleagues do not. In this case it would be preferable for her colleagues to be aware of her beliefs. This way the team could make accommodations for her early departure on Fridays, and she could perhaps offer to work late on Thursdays. Fear, confusion, anxiety, and hostility are common attitudes and perceptions and a frequent source of conflict between individuals and groups, and these feelings are often magnified when the individuals are demographically different. As can be seen from the above example, these attitudes toward and perceptions about others can be long lasting and self-fulfilling. When such feelings are allowed to develop, conflict is bound to occur.

Another common source of conflict is differences in personal style or personality. An obvious example of this is the predictable tension between two roommates who are on different “body clocks.” The early riser who gets up at dawn and the night owl who sleeps until noon are almost certain to get into conflict with each other. Conflicts likely occur between the “slob” and the “neat freak.” The manager who is task-oriented and the employee who is a perpetual socializer are likely to encounter much tension and conflict in their boss–subordinate relationship. Personality conflicts can result in unproductive behaviors at work including gossip, jealousy, insults, taking sides or playing favorites, slowing of work speed, forming of cliques, and even looking for another job!

**Conflict Management Strategies**

Knowing what causes conflicts is half the battle. Knowing what to do when conflicts arise, as they inevitably do, composes the other half. In this section we are focused on conflict management, as opposed to resolution. Conflict management recognizes that sources of conflict will probably always be present (for example resource limitation) and seeks ways to live with it, minimize its effect, and manage it. Conflict resolution (e.g., in arbitration or alternative dispute resolution) seeks to eliminate the cause of the conflict, thus eliminating the conflict itself. This is not always possible. When deciding on a
strategy for dealing with a specific conflict, keep two factors in mind: your goals, or what you hope to accomplish through the interaction, and the importance of the relationship to you. The first consideration when selecting a strategy is assessing your goals: What personal or organizational goals are to be accomplished, and how important is it to achieve those exact goals? Remember that conflicts often exist because of opposing goals. The nature and importance of a particular set of goals for you will determine which strategy is most appropriate for the situation.

The second consideration when choosing a conflict resolution strategy is the depth, quality, and duration of the relationship.

Before selecting a strategy, work through answers to the following questions:

- Is this relationship long term or passing?
- Is the relationship substantive (goes beyond business issues to more personal matters) or narrow?
- Is the relationship more important to me than the matter under discussion?
- How important is it to maintain a working or friendly relationship with those with whom I am in conflict?
- What possible ramifications will surface after the dust settles?

How you answer these questions will impact the conflict strategy you ultimately select.

Research on conflict management proposes five strategies that are available based on the intersection between relationship and goal importance.

The figure below helps illustrate how each conflict management strategy maps with the assessed importance of the goal and the relationship. Each option has advantages and disadvantages. The appropriate option depends on your preferences and on the context of the specific situation.

**Conflict-Handling Orientation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Competition</th>
<th>Collaboration</th>
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<tr>
<td>Avoidance</td>
<td>Accommodation</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Assertiveness: Party’s desire to satisfy own concerns</th>
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<td>Cooperation</td>
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- **Avoiding**—in an avoidance or withdrawing strategy, you choose not to deal with the issues or the people involved. You retreat from the situation, hoping it either goes away or resolves itself. This strategy is suitable for situations in which the issues are trivial or of only minor importance to you, when emotions are high, you feel you have no chance of satisfying your concerns, or when others could resolve the conflict more effectively. Avoiding is dangerous if the matter under discussion requires your attention. It may resurface if not dealt with effectively. What’s worse, conflicts that are set
aside or ignored can fester due to lack of communication and clarification, making it more difficult—and necessary—to address at a later time. If the conflict is one that must be addressed, save time and emotional energy by speaking up soon after the conflict is recognized. Avoidance can lead to a “lose–lose” scenario; goals may not be addressed or achieved and the relationship may not be able to progress beyond its current state.

- **Accommodating** (Smoothing)—when you use an accommodation strategy to resolve a conflict, you are more concerned with maintaining the relationship than in accomplishing a specific goal through the interaction. This strategy is appropriate when the issue is not that important to you or when harmony is of greater importance to you than “winning” on the issue. For example, if your children challenge your decision to take them to Burger King for lunch (McDonald’s has the better toy this week), it’s okay to give in to their wishes if both choices are equally suitable. It saves time and emotional energy, and it can be used in a later conflict negotiation (“I did what you wanted; now I want you to do . . . for me”). If you are always accommodating, as in “you win and I lose,” it might signal that you are possibly sacrificing some important goals for the sake of the relationship. You might wonder why others never seem to do the same for you. Sometimes we do this because we want to be “nice” and have others like us. However, over-reliance on accommodating in conflict situations could be harmful to you and the relationship in the long term as you are likely to build up resentment over your unmet needs.

- **Compromising**—when you compromise or “split the difference” in a conflict, you agree to give up part of your goal and part of the relationship in order to reach an agreement. This strategy is effective for achieving temporary solutions, when both parties are at a comparable level, when there are time pressures, or as a backup when collaboration or competing is neither possible nor successful. This strategy is the political equivalent of “win some, lose some.” In other words, you consciously agree to accept that sometimes in the relationship you’ll get your way and other times you won’t. This is possible in a long-term relationship where there’s time for give-and-take exchange. However, many people and groups jump to this strategy too quickly without pursuing synergy or collaboration. Perhaps it’s our feelings about risk: I’m better off getting half of what I want than risking it and getting nothing. Whether this is true or appropriate depends on the situation.

- **Competing** (Forcing)—in a competing strategy, you work to achieve your goals at all costs, even if it means sacrificing the relationship. This is an “I win, you lose” strategy. Forcing may be appropriate when you have severe time restrictions, are in a crisis situation, need to issue an unpopular decision, or have to take an action that is vital to an organization’s welfare. Some salespeople are guilty of forcing sales. They care about the commission they earn if they sell you a car—today—and use techniques (this is the last one [or day]; if you leave now, the deal expires) that make buyers feel pressured into the sale. More successful salespeople realize that future sales from this person and others in his or her network are likely if agreements are reached collaboratively as opposed to with a forcing approach. However, forcing children out on a specific path when the fire alarm rings is not only inappropriate but is safer than discussing or arguing over other options.

- **Collaborating** (Integrating)—the ultimate “win–win” strategy. It involves energy, commitment, and excellent skills in communication, problem solving, and negotiation. Collaboration is appropriate when there is plenty of time, when all want a solution that satisfies all parties’ objectives and maintains the relationship, and when the issue is very important to all parties involved. It is also critical when the conflicting parties are responsible for implementing the solution. If you feel a solution was only partly effective or was forced on you, you will be less likely to put your heart and soul into its implementation. Coming to a consensus or finding an integrative solution takes considerable problem-solving effort and time. In collaboration, both parties don’t necessarily agree, but both feel comfortable enough to express their disagreement and opinions and can work towards an optimal solution.
Although collaborating or the win–win option appears to be the ideal strategy, it is not appropriate in all cases. Each of the strategies has strong and weak points. No one solution is best suited for all situations. The best managers are those who can move fluidly from one style to the next depending on the situation and circumstances. As a manager, you will find yourself using all of these strategies. The choice of one over the other depends on the situation and persons involved as well as your own personality. Each of us has a style with which we’re naturally most comfortable. (You’ll have an opportunity to identify yours using one of the chapter exercises.) Be aware of your natural tendency and develop proficiency in using other, less comfortable styles, depending on what a situation dictates.

Following are some tips for making these strategies work.

- **Control your temper and emotional response.** Demonstrate your respect for the other party’s feelings. Validate that the conflict is real to them no matter how trivial it may seem to you. Embracing conflict builds honest relationships. By validating both parties’ feelings about a situation you can then move into a problem-solving mode.
Conflict Prevention Techniques

While conflict can be healthy in an organization or relationship, it still makes sense to eliminate some sources of friction before they even begin. By effectively managing conflict, managers can gain the benefit of conflict without the costs. Following are some techniques that can be used to minimize or deflect conflict.

**Team building.** As organizations have gotten flatter and less hierarchical, individuals are working in teams dedicated to specific project goals. Providing training and coaching on team-building skills can reduce the amount of conflict that occurs in the team setting. Some of these skills include:

- Setting clear objectives.
- Developing shared goals.
- Establishing team norms.
- Understanding the stages through which teams progress.
- Clarifying expectations.
- Planning projects and meeting deadlines.

**Diversity training.** As organizations have become more diverse, individuals find themselves working more and more with people who vary in terms of background, physical ability, culture, ethnicity, gender, religious beliefs, education, economic status, sexual orientation, political view, values, goals, ideas, and knowledge base. Diversity training is now offered by many large companies as a way of ensuring that employees understand the importance of differences among individuals and how to manage them effectively. This training often includes components such as:

- Self-awareness of personal prejudices and stereotypes.
- Individual differences and how they develop.
- Valuing differences.
- Maximizing each person’s strengths and capabilities to the advantage of the organization.
- Understanding and reducing discrimination.
Legal guidelines for dealing with issues such as sexual harassment.

Cross-training and cross-functional team training.22

Open communication. Companies are beginning to adopt more informal and personalized ways of connecting with their employees. By exchanging information freely and keeping people informed, companies find they are able to reduce some of the conflicts that arise from lack of information. Companies with open communication systems encourage:

- Regular staff meetings.
- Internal newsletters.
- Employee attitude surveys.
- 360-degree feedback (programs in which employees and managers receive performance feedback from subordinates, peers, and superiors).

Conflict management training. Many companies have discovered the benefits of providing their employees with training in dealing effectively with conflict. These programs teach participants to:

- Handle conflict constructively.
- Respect the legitimacy of others’ points of view, feelings, and perceptions.
- Listen actively.
- Communicate assertively.
- Problem-solve collaboratively.
- Support conflict constructively.
- Help others avert unnecessary strife.
- Use communication skills to influence the way in which conflict is handled.23
- Anticipate and act accordingly.

Resource allocation. As long as resources need to be shared among various departments within an organization, conflict will be a part of organizational life. While some conflict can be healthy and constructive, conflict also has negative side effects. Unresolved and continuous conflict can lower productivity and morale and lead to high turnover. One technique effective managers use to reduce the possible effects of negative conflict is to seek new ways in which resources can be obtained and allocated. If internal resources can be increased or reallocated, the number of win–lose situations is likely to drop. Of course, it still might not be possible to increase resources sufficiently to allow all parties to become winners. Related to this issue is the process by which resources are allocated. The more secretive this process, the greater the likelihood that organizational members will perceive inequity and take steps to reduce this. To the degree possible, organizations should establish rewards at the highest level—to encourage collaboration across departments and unit—and involve key players in resource allocation decision processes to increase the fairness and effectiveness of these decisions.

The techniques just described focus primarily on what managers can do in their organizations to reduce sources and consequences of conflict. Following are a few additional techniques that individuals can use when interacting with others in a personal or professional setting.

Communication. Two communication techniques helpful for avoiding conflicts are using “I” language and paying attention to nonverbal cues. When we say things like “you just don’t understand,” or “your idea will never work,” we put others on the defensive. They feel attacked and strike back, causing conflict to escalate. Take responsibility for your communication—“I’m not sure I’ve clearly stated my objection,” or “I have a concern about the marketing part of this plan. Can we discuss this?”—and conflicts are less likely to occur.
On the other hand, there are times when we add to conflict by communicating. We flame the fires by paying too much attention to issues that would be better dealt with via the reinforcement technique of “extinction,” providing no reinforcement at all by simply ignoring the event. Much as we would prefer this to be the case, things don’t always get better by communicating openly. Sometimes it’s best simply to express your opinion, “agree to disagree,” and table the matter.

**Managing others’ expectations.** Two techniques worth mentioning are setting limits and communicating consequences. Imagine your boss provides you with yet another project. You can do it, for sure, but not today, or this week for that matter. At least not with everything else on your plate. Most managers can’t read minds. If you won’t be able to complete the project when and how it is expected, let your boss know now instead of waiting until a critical deadline has passed. Setting limits—“I’m happy to do this project, but I need to let you know that the other project you wanted me to do will have to be placed on hold”—can help manage your boss’s expectations and avoid a future conflict. Similar to setting limits, sometimes we need to communicate consequences. Returning to the lazy teammate scenario, realize that saying nothing is akin to approving this behavior. If you’ve tried reasoning, clarifying the issue, and asserting the team’s needs but nothing has changed, it may be time to use consequences. “We’ve tried several times to get you to do what we’re asked. If your part of the project is not up to the standards we’ve agreed to by Friday, we’re going to ask the team leader to have you reassigned off the team.”

**Focusing on others first.** Often when we disagree with another person, we rush to explain why our ideas are superior. Like “you” language, this tendency can motivate others to defend themselves. One effective technique for preventing conflict involves anticipating another’s disagreement or objection and explaining how your proposal takes this issue into account. “I know you’re concerned about x, so let me tell you how I think this can be overcome.” Even helpful advice could be taken the wrong way, implying that the listener is performing ineffectively. When you are looking to change or improve organizational processes, consider first how others might benefit from the change. Since most people dislike change, you can increase their willingness to listen to your idea if they feel doing so can benefit them and their organization. You can avoid conflicts by appealing to another’s self-interest; for example, “I know that the current reimbursement process works. However, if we can reduce the number of approval signatures needed, you’ll reduce time spent on your inbox and show us that you trust us to act appropriately.”

**Summary**

Conflict is inevitable. People are unique and have different interests, goals, perspectives, values, and needs. For this reason, conflict can and does occur. Not all conflict is dysfunctional; some conflict can actually increase innovation, creativity, and the bond between conflicting parties. Practicing conflict prevention techniques can help you eliminate or diffuse conflicts before they surface. By knowing likely sources of conflict and appropriate strategies for dealing with different types of conflict, you can manage your response to conflict and improve your interactions with others.

**Key Terms and Concepts**

| Accommodating | Interactionist view (of conflict) |
| Avoiding | Intergroup conflict |
| Collaborating | Intragroup conflict |
| Competing | Negative conflict |
| Compromising | Positive conflict |
| Conflict | |
Endnotes

14. Adopted from work of Ronald Fry, Jared Florian, and Jacque McLemore, Department of Organizational Behavior, Weatherhead School of Management, Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, Ohio, 1984.
Exercise 12–A
Assessing Yourself

Circle the response that most closely correlates with each item below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neither</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I confront conflict rather than avoid it.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3  4  5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. I am not afraid of conflict.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3  4  5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I understand the difference between positive and negative conflict.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3  4  5</td>
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<td>4. I know how to deal with conflict constructively.</td>
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<td>5. In a group or work situation, I create a climate that supports</td>
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<td>constructive conflict and encourages differing ideas.</td>
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<td>6. I don’t overreact when conflict develops and have a strategy</td>
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<td>to use when conflict does occur.</td>
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<td>7. I accommodate others when the relationship is more</td>
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<td>important to me than the issue.</td>
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<td>8. I use compromise as a back-up conflict strategy when</td>
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<tr>
<td>appropriate.</td>
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<td>9. I use collaboration as a conflict strategy when the issue is</td>
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<td>important and both parties have the time necessary to</td>
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<td>deal with the conflict.</td>
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<td>10. I view conflict as a positive force for change.</td>
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<td>11. I use a collaborative approach when dealing with conflict.</td>
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<td>12. I consider the source of the conflict as well as my goals and</td>
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<td>the type of relationship I have with the person before</td>
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<td>developing a strategy for dealing with the conflict.</td>
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<td>13. I avoid conflict if the situation is minor or emotions are high.</td>
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<td>14. I am able to control my temper in a conflict situation.</td>
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<td>15. I focus on learning about the issues involved before</td>
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<td>attempting to resolve a conflict.</td>
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<td>16. I understand the types of strategies available to deal with</td>
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<td>conflicts and know how to select a strategy that is</td>
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<td>appropriate for the situation.</td>
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<td>17. I focus on changing behaviors, not people.</td>
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<td>18. I pick my battles.</td>
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<td>19. I search for common ground in conflict situations.</td>
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<td>20. I work toward win–win solutions whenever possible.</td>
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<td>21. I have acquired skills and training to help me know how to</td>
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<td>manage conflict.</td>
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<td>22. I understand the role of team building in reducing conflict.</td>
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<td>23. I appreciate diversity and don’t let differences with others</td>
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<td>lead to unnecessary conflict.</td>
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<td>24. I respect the legitimacy of others’ views.</td>
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<td>25. I help others avoid unnecessary strife.</td>
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<td>26. I use communication techniques that can keep conflict</td>
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<td>from occurring or manage conflict once it does occur.</td>
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<td>27. I use techniques geared toward others—for focusing on their</td>
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<td>needs or objections or appealing to their interests—to</td>
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<td>reduce the occurrence of conflict.</td>
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<td>28. I use limit setting and consequences (when appropriate) to</td>
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<td>manage others’ expectations and reduce the chances that conflict</td>
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<td>will occur.</td>
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Sum your circled responses. If your total is 54 or higher, you might want to explore ways to improve your skill in the area of conflict management.
Exercise 12–B  Conflict Case Studies

Case Study #1
As freshman year came to a close, I looked forward to moving onto the main campus and to living with five other girls whom I thought of as my friends. At that time I had no idea as to what I was getting myself into. We all had been friends freshman year, but I guess I did not know them well enough to suspect that there might be some problems. My biggest concern is their disrespectfulness. They not only disrespect our shared living room, but they also disrespect my personal belongings. They are very inconsiderate of my feelings. Three of them are probably the dirtiest people I have ever met. I am not saying that I am super clean, but I am not dirty. I may make a mess or two and clean it up, but I am not dirty. These girls, my suitemates, leave their garbage all over the suite room: soda cans, potato chip bags, and half-eaten melted ice cream cartons. It is absolutely disgusting and it makes me very angry. No one ever takes out the garbage or the recycling except me. I know that I should not accept this dirty habit, but I have a difficult time of standing up for myself and being assertive.

The other way that they are disrespectful is that they go through my personal items when I am not around and often take things, especially my food. I usually do not mind when people use my things, but a little courtesy to ask permission goes a long way. It has gotten to the point where I have to hide my food and other personal items that I don’t want them to touch.

1. What is your immediate reaction to the scenario? How would you feel if you were the person writing about this situation?
2. How could this situation have been avoided?
3. What approaches to resolving this conflict are appropriate?
4. What are some things that, if done, would make this approach successful?
5. What are some things to avoid when attempting to resolve this conflict? Why?

Case Study #2
My boss and I are having some interpersonal problems. There are several things that he does that I find really annoying. To start, he is not considerate of my employees or me. I often find myself thinking that I would be reluctant to do the things he does around me that annoy me. Yet he’s my boss so what can I do? He comes in late to the office, after my co-workers and I have been working for a while and have our day planned. Inevitably he’ll come in, interrupt, and lay on us a whole new set of priorities for the day. To be fair, he does stay late (we have flextime in our office) and he has a good reason to be late—he has child care responsibilities to fulfill on school mornings. But his habit of coming in and interrupting the schedule for our day is really off-putting. By the time I’ve listened to his concerns, reprioritized my and my staff’s work, and gotten back on track, it’s almost lunchtime and I feel I’ve wasted almost a half day trying to respond to his concerns. I’m afraid to confront him—he’s a good guy and it would only put him on the defensive. And wouldn’t really change anything. But I’m also tired of not feeling productive. I just wish he would be a little more sensitive to our situation and be better organized and more aware of our time constraints. Is that asking too much?

1. What is your immediate reaction to the scenario? How would you feel if you were the person writing about this situation?
2. How could this situation have been avoided?
3. What approaches to resolving this conflict are appropriate?
4. What are some things that, if done, would make this approach successful?
5. What are some things to avoid when attempting to resolve this conflict? Why?
Exercise 12–C
Who Gets the Money?

You are members of a board whose goal is to decide on the distribution of funds. A total of $200 million is available for medical research. You represent a special interest group interested in receiving a portion of the funds. You need to fully support your position and to verbalize your reasoning for getting the funds distributed to your interest group.

*Special Interests: (information on the roles will be provided by instructor)*
- AIDS
- Breast cancer
- Alzheimer’s
- Diabetes
- Birth defects

*Questions*
1. What process did you use to advocate for your interest over the interests of others?
2. How did each individual in the group feel about the group discussion?
3. Was participation between each member balanced? Did all have a chance to advocate for their special interest?
4. What process did the group use to arrive at a decision on how the funds should be allocated?
5. Why was the exercise difficult?
6. What feelings surfaced during the exercise? Would you have preferred staying out of the group process? Explain.
7. Let’s say you were asked to lead the group in a process used to complete this task. What would you do before, during, and after the process to ensure it was efficient and effective?

Exercise 12–D
Conflict Role-Plays

In small groups, role-play one or more of the following scenarios. Perform them in the small group or in front of the large group or class. For each scenario acted out, analyze and discuss:
- What strategies were used?
- What attitudes were depicted?
- What worked and why?
- What didn’t and why?

*Scenarios*
1. You and your roommate are in disagreement over how clean to keep the apartment.
2. You and your parents disagree on whether you should have a car at school.
3. You think one of your employees is harassing another employee sexually.
4. Two of your employees are unable to agree on anything in staff meetings.
5. One of your co-workers is accepting gifts from a supplier; this is forbidden by your company’s policy.
6. You think a fellow swimmer is cheating in competitions.
Exercise 12–E
Conflict Assessment

1. Briefly describe one conflict situation in which you found yourself recently (in the past couple of years). What were the reasons for and outcomes of this conflict? __________

2. Using the five conflict styles discussed in this chapter, describe the style you used in resolving the conflict discussed in number 1, pointing to specific behaviors and communication patterns that are evidence of this style. In what ways was this style effective and/or ineffective in this situation? __________

3. What style did the person with whom you were in conflict use? Evidence? In what ways was s/he effective and/or ineffective in this situation? __________

4. If you could replay this scenario, what things would you do the same, and why; what things would you have done differently, and why? __________

5. What conflict style are you most comfortable using? Why? __________
Exercise 12–F
Humpty Dumpty’s Spaceship Challenge

In teams of three to six, create a spaceship for Humpty Dumpty (an egg) that will withstand the gravitational forces that occur during a three-foot drop. The spaceship that withstands the highest drop will be the winner. If there is a tie, then the winner will be the spaceship fabricated out of the greatest number of materials. Each spaceship must be fabricated out of at least three materials. Each team only has possession of one material, so you will need to negotiate with other teams to acquire new materials.

Your team will be given 10 minutes to plan your spaceship design. You are to decide what material your spaceship will be made from and determine which teams you will need to negotiate with for materials.

Your team will be given 20 minutes to negotiate material and construct the spaceship. Negotiate as effectively as you possibly can; use any strategies or tactics.

Questions
1. Before approaching your opponents, how did you prepare for the negotiation process?
2. Did you use the same conflict-handling styles for all opponents that you negotiated with? Explain.
3. In this situation, which conflict-handling styles were most successful? Why?
4. Did every negotiation work out exactly as you planned and hoped? Why or why not?
5. What factors helped you in the negotiation process? What could you have done differently to make your negotiations more successful?
6. In performing this exercise, what lessons did you learn about negotiation? How does this exercise relate to negotiations in the “real world”?

Source: Used with permission of the author, Kim Eddleston, doctoral student, University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT. This exercise was presented at the 2000 Eastern Academy of Management/Experiential Learning Association Conference.

Exercise 12–G
Try This . . .

1. Observe an argument at work or school. Afterwards, analyze the situation: What is the source of the conflict? What is the level of relationship involved? What strategies are the parties using? What’s working? What’s not?
2. Analyze a recent news event that involved the use of force or violence (e.g., a school shooting). How could this situation have been handled differently?
3. Observe a TV show or movie. How do the main characters handle conflict effectively and ineffectively? What strategies are used? What strategies could be used? Some potential movies include The Outsiders, Red Dawn, Easy Rider, Red October, Braveheart, The Little Mermaid, Antz, West Side Story, 12 Angry Men, You’ve Got Mail, Network, Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner, The Color Purple, Iron Giant, Hercules, Pocahontas, Mutiny on the Bounty, Glory.
Exercise 12–H Reflection/Action Plan

This chapter focused on conflict management—what it is, why it is important, and how to improve your skills in this area. Complete the worksheet below upon completing all reading and experiential activities for this chapter.

1. The one or two areas in which I am most strong are:

2. The one or two areas in which I need more improvement are:

3. If I did only one thing to improve in this area, it would be to:

4. Making this change would probably result in:

5. If I did not change or improve in this area, it would probably affect my personal and professional life in the following ways: