



conflict and cohesion in groups

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conflict in groups

Conflict is unavoidable in an effective group. Rarely do conscientious members work in groups for any length of time without expressing differences and disagreeing. Yet despite the inevitability of conflict, many of us go out of our way to avoid or suppress it. One of the myths about effective groups is “that they are characterized by chumminess. Many effective teams look more like battlegrounds, it turns out. . . . Teams with vastly competent members embrace conflict as the price of synergy and set good idea against good idea to arrive at the best idea.”¹

The word *conflict* is frequently associated with quarreling, fighting, anger, and hostility. While these elements may be present in a group situation, conflict does not have to involve the expression of negative emotions. We define **conflict** as the disagreement and disharmony that occurs in groups when differences are expressed regarding ideas, methods, and/or members. When treated as an expression of legitimate differences, conflict “can be used as the spur to find the wider solution, the solution that will meet the mutual interest of the parties involved in it.”²

Putnam has classified the sources of conflict as substantive, procedural, and affective.³

■ Substantive Conflict

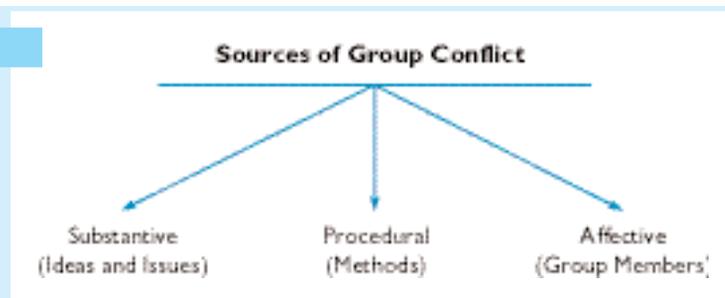
Substantive conflict is disagreement over members’ ideas and group issues. For example, when members of a student government council argue whether or not student activities fees should be raised, their conflict is substantive. Such conflict is directly related to working toward the group’s goal of serving students’ cocurricular needs.

■ Procedural Conflict

Procedural conflict is disagreement among group members about the methods or process the group should follow in its attempt to accomplish a goal. Whereas

FIGURE 7.1

Sources of Group Conflict



some group members may want to begin a discussion by suggesting solutions to a problem, others may want to start by gathering and discussing information. Some members may believe that a decision should be made by secret ballot while others may want a show of hands.

■ **Affective Conflict**

Affective conflict centers around the personalities, communication styles, and emotions of group members. Its causes are numerous. Affective conflict may occur when a member does not feel valued or is threatened by the group. Affective conflict also occurs when members believe that their ideas are not judged fairly or when group members are struggling for power. Affective conflict is more difficult to resolve because it involves people's feelings and the way members relate to one another.

Frequently when disagreement occurs in groups, both substantive and affective types of conflict are present. For example, Dee believes student fees should be raised in order to fund more campus activities. Charles disagrees and suggests that the existing funds should be used more efficiently rather than placing a larger financial burden on students. At this point in the discussion, the conflict is substantive; it is focused on issues. However, when responding to Dee, Charles rolls his eyes and states that "only a political fool believes that higher fees are the answer to the problem." Not only does Dee disagree with Charles on the issues, but she is also angered by his comment. Now the conflict is not just substantive; it has become affective as well.

constructive and destructive conflict



Conflict itself is neither good nor bad. However, the way in which a group deals with conflict can be constructive or destructive.

Destructive conflict results when groups engage in behaviors that create hostility and prevent achievement of the group's goal. Constant complaining, personal insults, conflict avoidance, and loud arguments or threats all contribute to destructive conflict.⁴ The quality of group decision making deteriorates when members are inflexible and not open to other points of view. Destructive conflict has the potential to permanently disable a group.

Constructive conflict results when group members express disagreement in a way that values everyone's contributions and promotes the group's goal. Figure 7.2 characterizes the differences between destructive and constructive conflict. Groups committed to constructive conflict abide by the following principles:⁵

- Disagreement is not punished.

"I'm not afraid of being fired for disagreeing with other members."

FIGURE 7.2

Constructive and Destructive Conflict

Constructive Conflict

- Focus on Issues
- Respect for Others
- Supportiveness
- Flexibility
- Cooperation
- Commitment to Conflict Management

Destructive Conflict

- Personal Attacks
- Insults
- Defensiveness
- Inflexibility
- Competition
- Avoidance of Conflict

- Members work with each other to achieve a mutually satisfying resolution of conflict.
“We can work this out. After all, we’re all after the same thing in the long run.”
- Lower-status members are free to disagree with higher-status group members.
“I know she’s the CEO, but I think there are some disadvantages to the approach she suggests.”
- The group has an agreed-upon approach for conflict resolution and decision making.
“Our group is using the Nominal Group Technique, so I know my ideas will be heard and included.”
- Members can disagree and still respect each other.
“The group may not like my idea, but members would never personally attack me for expressing my opinion.”

Constructive group conflict has many positive outcomes. Issues and people are better understood through an open exchange. The quality of decision making improves as opposing viewpoints and concerns are discussed. Expressing differences constructively can make a group discussion more interesting and promote participation.

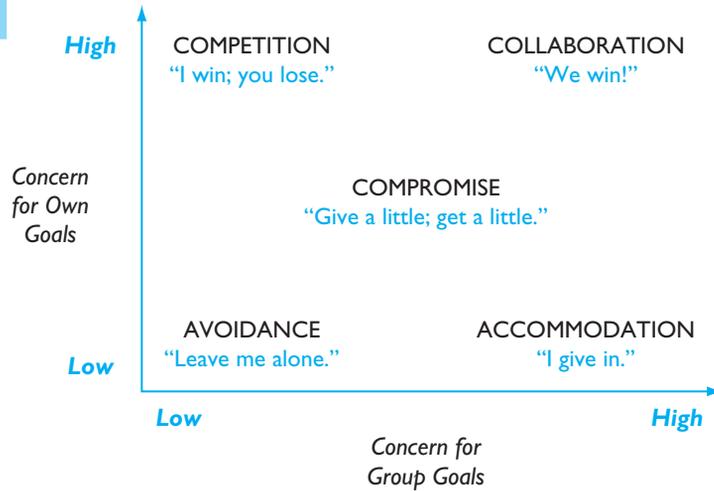


conflict styles

There are many ways of identifying and classifying different styles of conflict. One of the most preferred methods suggests that individuals are predisposed to using one of the following five conflict styles: avoidance, accommodation, competition, compromise, and collaboration.⁶ These five styles can be further understood by examining the extent to which a group member’s approach to conflict is focused on achieving personal goals and/or the group’s goal. Members

FIGURE 7.3

Conflict Styles



who are motivated to achieve their own goals tend to choose more competitive approaches. Cooperative members are usually more concerned with achieving the group's goals. Figure 7.3 illustrates the relationship of each conflict style to a group member's motivation.

■ Avoidance

When members are unable or unwilling to accomplish their own goals or contribute to achieving the group's goal, they may adopt the **avoidance conflict style**. Group members using this style may change the subject, avoid bringing up a controversial issue, and even deny that a conflict exists. Avoiding conflict in groups is usually counterproductive because it fails to address a problem and can increase group tensions. Furthermore, ignoring or avoiding conflict does not make it go away.

However, in some circumstances, avoidance of conflict can be an appropriate approach, specifically when

- the issue is not that important to you.
- you need to take time to collect your thoughts or control your emotions.
- other group members are effectively addressing the same concerns.
- the consequences of confrontation are too risky.

■ Accommodation

Group members using the **accommodating conflict style** give in to other members at the expense of their own goals. A genuine desire to get along with other

group members is often the motivation of accommodators. Such members believe that giving in to others serves the needs of the group even when the group could benefit from further discussion. A group member who always approaches conflict by accommodating others may ultimately be perceived as less powerful and have less influence in group decision making.

Accommodating during conflict can be an appropriate approach when

- the issue is very important to others but not very important to you.
- it is more important to preserve group harmony than to resolve the current issue.
- you realize you are wrong or have changed your mind.
- you are unlikely to succeed in persuading the group to adopt your position.

■ **Competition**

The **competitive conflict style** occurs when group members are more concerned with their own goals than with meeting the needs of the group. Competitive members want to win; they argue that their ideas are superior to the alternatives suggested by others. When used inappropriately, the competitive style may be characterized by hostility, ridicule, and personal attacks against group members. Approaching conflict competitively tends to reduce group members to winners and losers. Ultimately, this may damage the relationships among group members.

In certain group situations, however, the competitive approach may be the most appropriate style. Approach conflict competitively when

- you have strong beliefs about an important issue.
- the group must act immediately on an urgent issue or emergency situation.
- the consequences of the group's decision may be very serious or harmful.
- you believe the group may be acting unethically or illegally.

■ **Compromise**

The **compromising conflict style** is a “middle ground” approach that involves conceding some goals in order to achieve others. When group members compromise, each member is willing to suffer some losses in exchange for gaining something else. Group members who approach conflict through compromise argue that it is a fair method of resolving problems since everyone loses equally. “However, when each person gives up something in order to meet the others halfway, the result is only partial satisfaction for all concerned. Commitment to solutions will be questionable.”⁷

The compromise approach should be used when the group has been unable to find a more constructive solution. Groups should consider compromising when

- other methods of resolving the conflict will not be effective.
- the members have reached an impasse and are no longer progressing toward a reasonable solution.
- the group does not have enough time to explore more creative solutions.

■ Collaboration

The **collaborative conflict style** searches for new solutions that will achieve both the individual goals of group members and the goals of the group. Instead of arguing over whose solutions are superior, the collaborative group looks for new and creative solutions that satisfy everyone in the group. When a group explores creative alternatives, the members can more fully contribute their unique talents and expertise to resolving a conflict.⁸ Collaboration promotes synergy.

There are, however, two important drawbacks to the collaborative approach. First, collaboration requires a lot of the group's time and energy. Some issues may not be important enough to justify such creative effort and extra time. Second, in order for collaboration to be successful, all group members must fully participate. Avoiders and accommodators can prevent a group from engaging in true collaboration.

Groups should approach conflict resolution collaboratively when

- they want to find a solution that will satisfy all group members.
- new and creative ideas are needed.
- a commitment to the final decision is needed from each group member.
- the group has enough time to commit to creative problem solving.

■ Choosing a Conflict Style

While individuals may be predisposed to a particular style, effective group members choose the conflict style that is most appropriate for a particular group in a particular situation. As situations change, so may the member's approach to conflict. One of us works as a legal communication consultant who routinely sees members of mock juries use various conflict styles while deliberating a case.⁹ The following is an example:

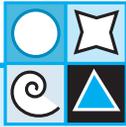
During the first hour of deliberation, the jury engaged in a heated debate over a controversial, yet central, issue in the case. Tony was conspicuously silent throughout this discussion. He was asked his opinion several times. Each time he indicated that he agreed with the arguments Pam had pre-

sented. On a later issue, Tony was a central participant. He argued vehemently that one of the defendants should not be held liable. He even said, “I’m just not going to concede this point. It’s not right for the man to go to jail over this.” Eventually, one of the jurors suggested that Tony reexamine a document presented as evidence of the defendant’s guilt. Tony was quiet for a few minutes and carefully reviewed the document for himself. He then looked up at the group and said, “Well, this changes everything for me. I guess he really was a part of the conspiracy.”

Tony used several approaches to deal with conflict in the group. First, he avoided it altogether. He simply had nothing to add to the discussion. Tony then became competitive when he thought a person might be unjustly imprisoned. However, he became accommodating when a review of the evidence convinced Tony that he had been wrong.

Folger, Poole, and Stutman suggest that when selecting a conflict style, you should consider the following questions:

- How important is the issue to you?
- How important is the issue to other members?



conflict in virtual groups



Conflicts in virtual groups arise for a variety of reasons and are difficult to resolve. Sometimes virtual groups become embroiled in an issue because members have misunderstood a message. In her book *The Argument Culture*, Deborah Tannen points out that “the potential for misunderstandings and mishaps with electronic communication expands in proportion to the potential for positive exchanges.”¹⁰ Have you ever received email messages that were not intended for you and that you found disturbing to read? Have you ever fired off an angry email only to regret your action later? The efficiency of email makes it easy to forward messages without carefully reading them, reply to messages while you’re still angry, and send a message to lots of people without knowing if each will interpret it the same way.

The time, distance, and possible anonymity separating members of virtual groups can play a significant role in increasing conflict. Unfor-

tunately, some group members feel less obligated to engage in polite behavior when the interaction isn’t face to face. As a result, virtual groups tend to communicate more negative, insulting, and impolite messages than do face-to-face groups.¹¹ Just because someone can’t challenge or reprimand you in person is no reason to abandon civil behavior. Barnes notes that “challenging comments can quickly turn professional working adults into ‘textual mud slingers.’” Curt email messages are rapidly thrown back and forth as the electronic packs of digital data pulse through the Internet to reach their destinations.¹²

Duarte and Snyder suggest that some technologies are better suited for dealing with interpersonal and task-related conflict than others.¹³ Using audio-only (e.g., the telephone) or data-only (e.g., email or bulletin boards) technology is a poor way to deal with conflict. Videoconferencing works slightly better. However, major conflicts are best resolved face to face.

- How important is it to maintain positive relationships within the group?
- How much time does the group have to address the issue?
- How fully do group members trust each other?¹⁴

Answers to these questions can suggest whether a particular conflict style is appropriate or inappropriate in a particular situation. For instance, if group members are not trusting of one another, the compromising style would be less appropriate. If the issue is very important, and the group has plenty of time to discuss it, collaboration should be explored. There is no single conflict style that will be effective in all group situations. The skilled member balances a variety of considerations and chooses an appropriate style.



Approaches to conflict management

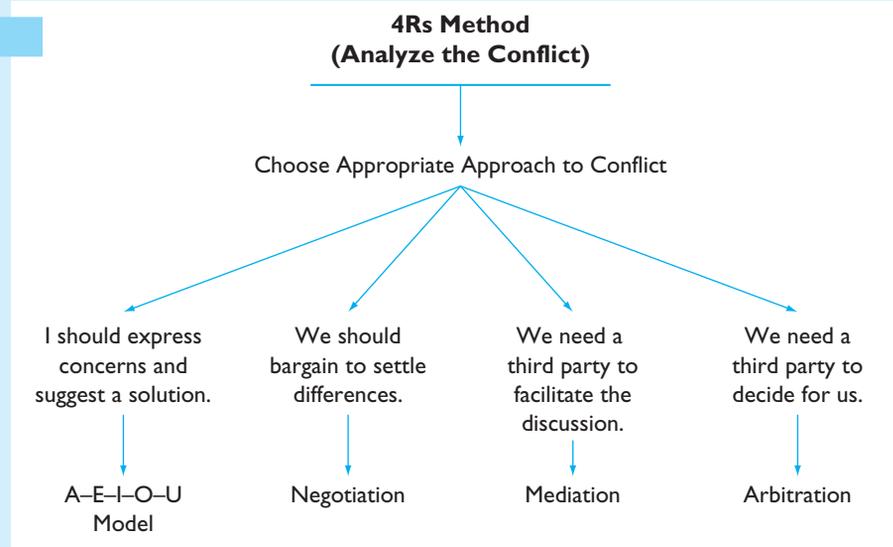
Groups can choose from many conflict management methods. Careful analysis of the conflict should determine which approach best suits the situation and the group. Effective group members are flexible and able to use a variety of approaches to resolving conflict.

■ The 4Rs Method

In order to choose the most appropriate conflict management method, you should make sure you understand your group's conflict. We suggest using the

FIGURE 7.4

Approaches to
Conflict
Management



4Rs method for analyzing the conflict in a particular situation. The four steps of the method are accompanied by these relevant questions:

- **Reasons.** What are the reasons for or causes of the conflict? Are the causes associated with expressed differences about issues, methods, and/or members? Do other concerned members agree with your assessment of the reasons for conflict?
- **Reactions.** How are group members reacting to one another? Are the reactions constructive or destructive in nature? Can member reactions be modified into more constructive behavior?
- **Results.** What are the consequences of the group's current approach to the conflict? Is the conflict serious enough to jeopardize the group's goal and member morale?
- **Resolution.** What are the available methods for resolving the conflict? Which method best matches the nature of the group and its conflict?

Analyzing and understanding the nature of the disagreement will result in a better resolution. The 4Rs method provides a way of thinking about conflict and selecting an appropriate approach to conflict management.

■ The A-E-I-O-U Model

In order to resolve conflict, a group must fully understand member concerns. If members do not understand the problem, they cannot effectively find solutions. Wisinski's **A-E-I-O-U Model** is a way to clearly communicate concerns and suggest alternative actions.¹⁵ The steps in the A-E-I-O-U Model are as follows:

A—Assume the other members mean well.

E—Express your feelings.

I—Identify what you would like to happen.

O—Outcomes you expect are made clear.

U—Understanding on a mutual basis is achieved.

The first step, *A*, requires a belief that other group members are willing to cooperate. Such a belief could be expressed as follows: "I know that all of us want this project to be successful."

The second step, *E*, identifies your feelings associated with a specific behavior or action: "But, I'm really worried because it seems as though we're not putting in the work that's needed." Expressing your feelings and describing behavior helps the group interpret your reaction to the situation.

The third step, *I*, requires that you not only express your concerns but also identify what you want to happen: "I would like to be assured that all of you are as concerned about the success of this project as I am and that you have been

thinking about how we can make sure the work gets done on time.” The group can now focus its discussion on solving the problem.

The fourth step, *O*, directs you to inform members of the potential outcomes of their behavior: “I sincerely believe that if we don’t work late for the next couple of days, we will not be prepared to make an effective group presentation next week.”

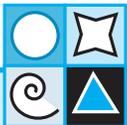
The final step, *U*, recognizes that your group may need to discuss your suggestions: “Could we try staying late for the next few days to get ahead of the game? What do you think?” A group will frequently reject an initial suggestion but then go on to develop a more satisfactory solution. The final step requires that all group members understand and agree to a solution. When all the steps in the A-E-I-O-U Model are combined, they become the essential ingredients in creating a constructive approach to conflict management.

■ Negotiation

Negotiation is a process of bargaining in order to settle differences or reach solutions. Normally, negotiation takes the form of compromise, with group members conceding some issues in order to achieve agreement on other points. Group members are more willing to bargain if they believe they will be no worse off and might even be better off by the end of the negotiation process.

Fisher, Ury, and Patton suggest that conflict can be resolved through a process of “principled negotiation.”¹⁶ The four principles are as follows:

- Separate the people from the problem.
- Focus on group interests, not positions.
- Generate a variety of possible solutions for mutual gain.
- Insist on objective criteria for choosing a solution.



TOOLBOX 7.1 Brainstorming and criteria



Groups can use a technique called brainstorming to generate potential solutions to a conflict. Brainstorming is a process for generating as many ideas as possible. In simplified terms, brainstorming can be described as “all input, no put down.” During a brainstorming session, group members are encouraged to generate as many ideas and solutions as possible. Only after the group has spent time generating

a wide range of solutions does the group evaluate each idea by using an agreed-upon set of criteria. These criteria should focus on the feasibility and mutual gain to be derived from each solution. **Chapter 9: Decision Making and Problem Solving in Groups** discusses the guidelines for brainstorming and ways to establish decision-making criteria.

When the focus is on defending positions, the result is winners and losers. By focusing on group interests, the entire group wins. Effective groups brainstorm alternatives and establish criteria with which to evaluate and choose a solution to their problem. Objective and agreed-upon criteria assure that no individual group member has an unfair advantage during negotiation.

The atmosphere is more competitive, partisan, and political in negotiation than it would be if the climate were suitable for collaboration. Wood notes that “because it allows members to pursue personal interests while acknowledging those of others, negotiation constrains communication to respect a delicate balance between individualism and interdependence.”¹⁷ However, group negotiation can become deadlocked when members are unable to appreciate the needs of others or are unwilling to make concessions. The following strategies can help break a deadlock:¹⁸

- Limit the scope of the problem by dividing it into manageable parts.
- Minimize defensive behavior by having members explain or paraphrase the other side’s position.
- Summarize areas of agreement to promote further cooperation.
- Take a break to relieve group tensions.
- Ask for more information to avoid inaccurate assumptions.

Clearly, group members must balance a variety of needs during negotiation.¹⁹ They must be willing to cooperate with others while attempting to meet as many of their own needs as possible. They must openly communicate what they are willing to concede yet not sacrifice more than necessary. Finally, members must balance the need to gain their own short-term goals against the benefits of mutually desirable long-term conflict resolution.

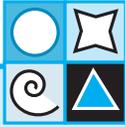
■ Mediation

In recent years, a process called *mediation* has become a more commonly used tool for resolving disputes. **Mediation** is “facilitated negotiation [that] employs the services of impartial third parties only for the purpose of guiding, coaching, and encouraging the disputants through negotiation to successful resolution and agreement.”²⁰ Mediation is an appropriate approach to conflict resolution when group members are unable to resolve the conflict by themselves and when everyone concerned is willing to participate in the process and abide by the final settlement. If group members cannot agree to these terms, then mediation is not an option.

Once a group has decided to use mediation, there are two basic requirements: an impartial mediator and a well-planned mediation session. The group must choose an impartial mediator who is not involved in the conflict. If a conflict involves all members of the group, a mediator from outside the group should be chosen. The group leader or another group member should be con-

decision making and

TOOLBOX 7.2 PROBLEM SOLVING



Many of the techniques for group problem solving and decision making can be used to manage conflict and resolve disagreements. For example, brainstorming can be used when disputants are having difficulty finding ways to solve their problem. When group members are reluctant to express differences, the nominal group technique can provide a way in

which written suggestions substitute for verbal interaction. By using a detailed standard agenda or parliamentary procedure, groups can focus on substantive conflict while reducing affective and procedural conflict. **Chapter 9** describes several decision-making and problem-solving methods. The principles and rules of parliamentary procedure are reviewed in the Appendix.

considered as a mediator only if he or she is not involved in the conflict. The mediator does not take sides in the dispute. Instead, he or she guides the group through the process and facilitates negotiation.

McKinney, Kimsey, and Fuller recommend that a mediated session follow four basic steps.²¹ First, the mediator explains the process and creates a supportive climate. Second, each group member is allowed to “tell his or her story” without interruption. The mediator then summarizes each group member’s perspective. Third, the mediator guides the group members toward possible solutions. Finally, after agreeing on a resolution to the conflict, the group discusses how the resolution will be implemented. Tjosvold and van de Vliert recommend that the mediator also take time to lead a discussion on ways the group can resolve future conflict.²²

■ Arbitration

Groups often resort to mediation when all other methods of resolving a conflict have failed. If mediation does not work, a group may seek arbitration. **Arbitration**, like mediation, involves a third party. However, after considering all sides, the arbitrator decides how to resolve the conflict. The arbitrator may choose one person’s solution or may develop a solution the group has not yet considered. Whatever the final decision, group members are obligated to accept and implement the solution, no matter what they think about the decision.

When turning to an arbitrator to make a decision, group members “have acknowledged that their own decision-making powers are insufficient to resolve the dispute. Their function, therefore, is to present their side of the case as fully and as capably as possible so that fairness and justice can prevail.”²³ Despite the hope for a just outcome, professional arbitrators understand that their decisions may not satisfy or please everyone in a group. However, for groups that cannot resolve conflicts or solve problems on their own or with the help of a mediator, arbitration may be the only way to make a needed decision.



group cohesion

Resolving conflict in groups does not guarantee success, nor does it ensure that group members will work together in pursuit of a common goal. Working in groups also requires cohesiveness. **Cohesion** is the mutual attraction that holds the members of a group together. Groups that are cohesive feel committed and unified; members develop a sense of teamwork and pride in the group. The following are characteristics of a cohesive group:

- High levels of interaction
- A friendly and supportive communication climate
- A desire to conform to group expectations
- The use of creative and productive approaches to achieving goals
- Satisfied members²⁴

■ Enhancing Cohesion

Cohesive groups are happier and get more work done. Clearly, your group wants to strive for cohesion. Based on Bormann and Bormann, we suggest four general strategies for developing group cohesion.²⁵

Effective coordination and cohesion help all teams “win.” What communication strategies could teams use to promote greater cohesion? (© Davis Barber/Photo Edit)



Establish a Group Identity and Traditions.

Begin by referring to the group with terms such as *we* and *our* instead of *I* and *my*. The language that members use to refer to the group can influence the way they perceive their connection to it. Some groups create more obvious signs of identity such as a group name, logo, or motto. As members continue to work and interact with one another, the group begins to develop its own history. Many groups develop rituals and ceremonies to reinforce traditions.

Emphasize Teamwork. The members of cohesive groups believe that their contributions are essential to the success of the group. Group members feel responsibility for and take pride in the work they do as well as the work of other members. They frequently make statements that stress the importance of everyone's role. Rather than the individual members taking personal credit for success, a cohesive group will emphasize the group's accomplishments.

Recognize and Reward Contributions. Frequently, group members become so involved in their own work that they neglect to praise others for their contributions. In addition, members are often quick to criticize others' mistakes and poor work. While constructive criticism is important, members must feel that their efforts are appreciated. Cohesive groups establish a climate in which praise is encouraged. Many groups reward individual efforts and initiative. Celebration dinners, letters of appreciation, certificates, and gifts are all ways in which some groups reward themselves.

Respect Group Members. When strong interpersonal relationships are developed in groups, members become more sensitive to each other's needs. Groups that require members to do their part of the work without regard for individual concerns will develop little cohesion. Treating members with respect, showing concern for their personal needs, and appreciating diversity will promote a feeling of acceptance.

■ **Groupthink**

Groupthink is a term that describes the deterioration of group effectiveness that results from in-group pressure.²⁶ Highly cohesive groups are at greater risk of succumbing to groupthink. Bennis, Parikh, and Lessem suggest that “perhaps the most damaging disease to a group's health is over-conformity, always the result of group pressure.”²⁷

Symptoms of Groupthink. Irving Janis, a professor at Yale University, developed the theory of groupthink after recognizing patterns in what he termed policy-making fiascoes. He suggests that groupthink was a significant factor in several major policy decisions, including the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba, the escalation of both the Korean and Vietnam wars, the attack on Pearl Harbor, and the Watergate burglary and cover-up.²⁸ Groupthink may also have contributed to the explosion of the space shuttle *Challenger*.²⁹ After analyzing many of these policy decisions, Janis identified eight symptoms of groupthink. The table shown in Figure 7.5 illustrates the symptoms and expressions of groupthink.

Dealing with Groupthink. The best way to deal with groupthink is to prevent it from happening in the first place. The following list provides

FIGURE 7.5

Groupthink

Groupthink Symptoms**Expressions of Groupthink**

Invulnerability: Is overly confident; willing to take big risks.

“We’re right. We’ve done this many times, and nothing’s gone wrong.”

Rationalization: Makes excuses; discounts warnings.

“What does Lewis know? He’s been here only three weeks.”

Morality: Ignores ethical and moral consequences.

“Sometimes the end justifies the means.”

Stereotyping Outsiders: Considers opposition too weak and stupid to make real trouble.

“Let’s not worry about the subcommittee—they can’t even get their own act together.”

Self-Censorship: Doubts his or her own reservations; unwilling to disagree or dissent.

“I guess there’s no harm in going along with the group—I’m the only one who disagrees.”

Pressure on Dissent: Pressures members to agree.

“Why are you trying to hold this up? You’ll ruin the project.”

Illusion of Unanimity: Believes everyone agrees.

“Hearing no objections, the motion passes.”

Mindguarding: Shields members from adverse information or opposition.

“Rhea wanted to come to this meeting, but I told her that wasn’t necessary.”

practical ways to minimize the potential of groupthink.³⁰ Choose the methods that are most appropriate for your group.

- Ask each member to serve in the role of critical evaluator.
- If possible, have more than one group work on the same problem independently.
- Discuss the group’s progress with someone outside the group. Report the feedback to the entire group.
- Periodically invite an expert to join your meeting and encourage constructive criticism.
- Discuss the potential negative consequences of any decision or action.
- Follow a formal decision-making procedure that encourages expression of disagreement and evaluation of ideas.
- Ask questions, offer reasons for positions, and demand justifications from others.
- Before finalizing the decision, give members a second chance to express doubts.

In the short term, groupthink decisions are easier. The group finishes early and doesn’t have to deal with conflict. However, the decision is often poor and sometimes results in harm. Spending the time and energy to work through differences will result in better decisions without sacrificing group cohesiveness.



Adapting to Differences

Conflict becomes more complex when group members are diverse; differences in cultural perspectives may result in misunderstandings, prejudices, and unintentionally offensive behavior. A group's failure to effectively manage conflict among culturally diverse members can have serious consequences. Companies that fail to understand, respect, and adapt to differences are likely to have more strikes and lawsuits, low morale among workers, less productivity, and a higher turnover of employees.³¹

The cultural values of individual members will greatly influence the degree to which they are comfortable with conflict and the way conflict is resolved. Members from cultures that value conformity are less likely to express disagreement than those from cultures that place a higher value on individualism. Whereas Japanese, German, Mexican, and Brazilian cultures value group conformity, Swedish and French cultures are generally more comfortable expressing differences.³² Furthermore, Chinese group members may feel uncomfortable with adversarial approaches to conflict.³³ It is also important to remember that cultural differences may be regional rather than international. For example, Franco-Canadians are often more cooperative during the negotiation of conflict while Anglo-Canadians are slower to agree to a resolution.³⁴

Groups must also be sensitive to how gender differences influence conflict. Women are more likely to avoid conflict or to leave a group when there is continuous conflict.³⁵ Additionally, women are more likely to address conflict privately rather than in front of the entire group.³⁶ Men and women can learn from each other's perspectives as they work through a group's conflict. Finally, it is important to note the gender differences summarized here are only generalizations. Men and women can and do use both competitive and collaborative approaches to conflict.

Groups that successfully manage conflict with a sensitivity to cultural and gender differences can increase their members' commitment to the group. Bennis, Parikh, and Lessem remind us that "if people's interests were always identical, life would stagnate. Diversity is the most essential feature of life."³⁷



balancing conflict and cohesion

Hocker and Wilmot refer to the management of conflict as "a delicate balancing act, like that of a tightrope walker, or a rock climber who must find just the right handholds or fall to sure death."³⁸ Groups must balance the need to express differences with the need to achieve group consensus. Individual thought must be encouraged, yet collective group goals need to be achieved.

FIGURE 7.6

Conflict Management



A group that lacks cohesion is less creative, productive, and satisfied. Extremely cohesive groups, however, risk engaging in groupthink. Yet fear of groupthink should not discourage efforts to promote cohesion. Groups that are characterized by too much or poorly managed conflict do not develop cohesion. However, groups that place too much emphasis on cohesion while avoiding conflict will often make bad decisions. Groups that engage in constructive conflict are able to successfully balance conflict and cohesion.

Summary Study Guide

- Conflict occurs when group members express differences about ideas, methods, and/or members.
- The three types of conflict are substantive (focuses on ideas), procedural (focuses on group process), and affective (focuses on personalities, communication styles, and emotions of group members).
- Destructive conflict is characterized by hostility directed toward other group members. Constructive conflict values members and promotes the group's goal.
- The five major conflict management styles are avoidance, accommodation, competition, compromise, and collaboration.
- Conflict in virtual groups can be more difficult to discuss and resolve.
- Before reacting, analyze conflict using the 4Rs method—consider the reasons, reactions, and results of conflict along with approaches to resolution.
- The A-E-I-O-U Model of conflict resolution is a technique for expressing your concerns and proposing alternatives in a supportive and constructive manner.

- The steps to principled negotiation include focusing on issues and group interests while generating solutions and establishing objective criteria.
- Groups can use third-party mediation or arbitration when conflicts have the potential to become a destructive force and a barrier to group progress.
- Cohesive groups are highly interactive and cooperative; they are more likely to achieve their goals and satisfy member needs.
- Groups can promote cohesion by establishing a group identity and tradition, stressing teamwork, recognizing and rewarding contributions, and respecting individual members' needs.
- Groupthink occurs when a group fails to sufficiently evaluate its decisions in order to achieve a consensus. Highly cohesive groups are at greater risk of becoming victims of groupthink.
- Groups can better adapt to cultural and gender differences when engaging in conflict by respecting those differences and focusing on shared goals.



GroupWork



Win as Much as You Can

Goal

To demonstrate the merit of competitive and cooperative models of conflict styles within the context of small group communication

Participants One or more groups of eight divided into four dyads (two-person subgroups)

Procedure*

1. There are ten rounds in this exercise. During each round you and your partner will have to choose an “X” or a “Y.” The “payoff” for each round is determined by the choices of all the dyads in your eight-person group.
2. There are three key rules:
 - Do not confer with other members of your group unless you are told to do so.
 - Each dyad must agree upon a single choice for each round.
 - Make sure that other members of your group do not know your dyad's choice until you are told to reveal it.
3. Confer with your partner on every round. Before rounds 5, 8, and 10, you can confer with the other pairs in your group.

Payoff Chart

4	Xs:	Lose	\$1.00 each
3	Xs:	Win	\$1.00 each
1	Ys:	Lose	\$3.00 each
2	Xs:	Win	\$2.00 each
2	Ys:	Lose	\$2.00 each
1	Xs:	Win	\$3.00 each
3	Ys:	Lose	\$1.00 each
4	Ys:	Win	\$1.00 each

*The textbook's *Instructor's Resource Manual* explains how to conduct this GroupWork exercise.

Tally Sheet

Round	Time Allowed	Confer with	Choice	\$ Won	\$ Lost	Balance
1	2 min.	partner				
2	1 min.	partner				
3	1 min.	partner				
4	1 min.	partner				
5*	3 min. +1 min.	group partner				
6	1 min.	partner				
7	1 min.	partner				
8**	3 min. +1 min.	group partner				
9	1 min.	partner				
10***	3 min. +1 min.	group partner				

*Payoff is multiplied by 3.

**Payoff is multiplied by 5.

***Payoff is multiplied by 10.

Source: Based on Gellerman, W. (1970). Win as much as you can. In J. W. Pfeiffer & J. E. Jones (Eds.), *A handbook of structured experiences for human relations training*, Vol. 2. La Jolla, CA: University Associates, pp. 66–69.



Assessment

Ross-DeWine Conflict Management Message Style Instrument

Directions Below you will find messages which have been delivered by persons in conflict situations. Consider each message separately and decide how closely this message resembles the ones that you have used in conflict settings. The language may not be exactly the same as yours, but consider the messages in terms of similarity to your messages in conflict. There are no right or wrong answers, nor are these messages designed to trick you. Answer in terms of responses you make, not what you think you should say. Give each message a 1–5 rating on the answer sheet provided according to the following scale. Mark one answer only.

In conflict situations, I

1	2	3	4	5
never say things like this	rarely say things like this	sometimes say things like this	often say things like this	usually say things like this

- _____ 1. “Can’t you see how foolish you’re being with that thinking?”
- _____ 2. “How can I make you feel happy again?”
- _____ 3. “I’m really bothered by some things that are happening here; can we talk about these?”
- _____ 4. “I really don’t have any more to say on this . . . (silence).”
- _____ 5. “What possible solutions can we come up with?”
- _____ 6. “I’m really sorry that your feelings are hurt—maybe you’re right.”
- _____ 7. “Let’s talk this thing out and see how we can deal with this hassle.”
- _____ 8. “Shut up! You are wrong! I don’t want to hear any more of what you have to say.”
- _____ 9. “It is your fault if I fail at this, and don’t you ever expect any help from me when you’re on the spot.”
- _____ 10. “You can’t do (say) that to me—it’s either my way or forget it.”
- _____ 11. “Let’s try finding an answer that will give us both some of what we want.”
- _____ 12. “This is something we have to work out; we’re always arguing about it.”
- _____ 13. “Whatever makes you feel happiest is OK by me.”
- _____ 14. “Let’s just leave well enough alone.”
- _____ 15. “That’s OK . . . it wasn’t important anyway. . . . You feeling OK now?”
- _____ 16. “If you’re not going to cooperate, I’ll just go to someone who will.”

- _____ 17. "I think we need to try to understand the problem."
 _____ 18. "You might as well accept my decision; you can't do anything about it anyway."

Scoring Instructions

By each item, list the rating (from 1 to 5) you gave that item. When you have entered all ratings, add total ratings for each column and divide by 6. Enter the resulting score in the space provided.

SELF Items	ISSUE Items	OTHER Items
1. _____	3. _____	2. _____
8. _____	5. _____	4. _____
9. _____	7. _____	6. _____
10. _____	11. _____	13. _____
16. _____	12. _____	14. _____
18. _____	17. _____	15. _____
Your Total Score _____	_____	_____
Average Score (13.17)	(24.26)	(21.00)

All of us may use one of the following styles in different settings and under different circumstances. People do tend to have a predominant style which is evidenced by the kinds of messages sent during conflict situations.

The SELF items deal with one's personal interests in the conflict situation. These messages suggest that one's primary concern is in resolving the conflict so that a person's personal view of the conflict is accepted by the other. This is a "win" approach to conflict resolution.

The ISSUE items deal with an emphasis on both parties dealing with the problem. These message statements suggest an overriding concern with the content of the conflict rather than the personal relationship.

The OTHER items deal with neither the conflict issues nor personal interests, but emphasize maintaining the relationship at a cost of resolving the conflict. These statements suggest that one would rather ignore the problem to maintain a good relationship with the other person.

The averages are an indication of scores one might expect to receive. Scores that are higher or lower than these means indicate a higher or lower use of this message style than would normally be expected.

Source: DeWine, S. (1994). *The consultant's craft: Improving organizational communication*. New York: St. Martin's, pp. 268–272; Ross, R. G., & DeWine, S. (1988). Communication messages in conflict: A message-focused instrument to assess conflict management styles. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 1, pp. 389–413.



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