



Pearson New International Edition

*Managing Conflict through Communication*

*Dudley D. Cahn Ruth Anna Abigail*  
*Fifth Edition*

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# Introduction to the Study of Conflict Communication

## OBJECTIVES

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

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

## KEY TERMS

accuracy	incompatible goals	prelude to conflict
adversely affect relationships	incompatible means	problematic situation
civility	inevitability of conflict principle	process
communication	initiation phase	process view of conflict communication
conflict communication	interdependence	productive conflict
conflict management	interpersonal conflict	resolution phase
conflict metaphor	linear model of communication	sense of urgency
conflict resolution cycle	meta-conflict perspective	transactional model of communication
destructive conflict	negative view of conflict	triggering event
differentiation phase	positive view of conflict	

From Chapter 1 of *Managing Conflict through Communication*, Fifth Edition. Dudley D. Cahn, Ruth Anna Abigail. Copyright © 2014 by Pearson Education, Inc. All rights reserved.

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

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

## THE NATURE OF CONFLICT

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

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

### Defining Interpersonal Conflict

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

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

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

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

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

By emphasizing the interdependence between or among the conflicting parties, we focus on conflict in interpersonal relationships. **Interdependence** occurs when those involved in a relationship characterize it as continuous and important, making it worth the effort to maintain. We want to underscore the fact *that interpersonal conflicts occur with people who are important to us and who we expect to continue seeing or working with in the future*. We may argue with a stranger, have a difficult time returning a defective product to a store, or endure the bad driving habits of another on the road, but these are not examples of interpersonal conflict because the conflicting parties do not have an interpersonal relationship.

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

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

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

### The Inevitability of Conflict

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **CONFLICT MANAGEMENT**

### **Defining Conflict Management as a Skill**

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

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

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

Skills are not innate; they are learned. We develop them through experience. The only way you learn how to handle conflict situations more competently is to work through the conflicts you encounter. Due to the complexity of the task, few successfully ride a bicycle the first time. Most fall off. Sometimes they are lucky and stop before hurting themselves. Soon, with a great deal of concentration, riding a bike is manageable, and then it becomes something that is almost second nature. The problem is that most of us are more willing to learn how to ride bicycles than we are to learn conflict management skills. Communication competence takes knowledge about the way conflict works, knowledge of the skills that are used in conflict situations, and practice.

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

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

### Linear and Transactional Approaches to Communication

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

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

I am not speaking to you.  
I don't want to talk about that.  
I disagree with you.  
I want to fight.  
I don't like you.  
I don't like what you said.  
I don't want to see you anymore.  
I want something to change.

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

Face-to-face  
Synchronous via some medium like a cell phone or instant messaging  
Asynchronous via an email, text message, or a relay person as the message carrier

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

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

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

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

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

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

the extreme, this mode of thinking might lead us to go so far as to accuse the other of being stupid, making a bad decision, or doing something wrong behaviorally. We may yell and scream until the conflict tilts in our favor. Obviously, this can do damage to our relationship with others. Fortunately, there are other ways to manage conflicts. Our need for an alternative approach leads us to the “transactional” model of communication.

While the linear view emphasizes the end product of communicating (convincing, persuading, controlling, or dominating the other), the **transactional model of communication** emphasizes managing and coordinating. Given this view, **communication** may be defined as the exchange of verbal and nonverbal messages in an attempt to better understand one another’s perspective and create shared meaning.<sup>10</sup> Such an approach recognizes that this view of communication (and by extension, conflict) isn’t something we do to one another, but something we do with one another (like teamwork).

Similarly, a conflict is not seen as something that happens when one person “sends” a message to another indicating that he or she is unhappy with some behavior of the other. Rather, conflict is seen as the behaviors of each person, in response to one another, exchanging messages, hearing each other out, cooperating, and jointly creating an understanding in which both people perceive themselves as being in conflict with one another, mutually sharing responsibility for the conflict situation, and working together to better deal with it. One student described it as “trying to build a sandcastle by directing someone else’s hands.”<sup>11</sup> Conflict is viewed as giving and taking, working together for a solution to a problem, discussing and arriving at mutual understandings, consensus, agreement, and resolution. Both conflicting parties have a responsibility toward empathizing with each other, avoiding judgment, keeping an open mind, welcoming feedback, and realizing that both may have to adapt to resolve the issue.

One implication of this approach is that we view communicators as working together to create meaning. The advantage is that we begin to recognize the importance of both people’s behavior in the conflict situation. One person acting “competently” in a conflict situation, using effective communication skills, usually cannot bring the conflict to a mutually satisfying resolution all by himself or herself. It takes two people to make a conflict, and it takes two people to manage or resolve it in a mutually agreeable manner. The way people talk about the conflict together, the way they express messages in response to one another, and the way they “read” each other’s nonverbal messages as the conflict is being enacted all create the conflict situation as well as manage it or move it to resolution. Moreover, it is not simply that the actions we choose are a result of the way we interpret situations; instead, what happens in this conflict affects how we think about future conflicts.

The primary difference between the linear and transactional focus in communication is seen in the visual metaphors we might use to explain each. While the primary visual metaphor for the linear model is a conveyor belt (messages sent and received in a linear fashion), in the transactional model, communication (and hence conflict as a type of communication) is seen more as a dance that two people do together (messages co-created by managing and coordinating).

## Destructive and Productive Conflict Communication Processes

What does it mean to take a process view of something? A **process** is dynamic, ongoing, and continuous (not static, at rest, or fixed). It is evolutionary in nature. Viewing objects, people, events, and social situations as processes means that we understand:

- Processes have stages or phases of development through growth or deterioration.
- They have a history in which a distinctive pattern emerges.
- They consist of continual change over time.
- They have ingredients that interact (affect one another) that may or may not lead to the next stage (depending on the ingredients).
- At any given point in time and space, they represent some outcome, stage, or state of being (like a picture or a single frame in a film).

The way we talk about something often fails to reflect a process view—such as “the happy couple,” “a divorced person,” or “an ex-convict”—which suggests that people do not change, are not at one stage of a developing life cycle or relationship, or do not learn from their experiences and grow. We forget that communication is a process when we focus on simply getting our message understood by others without trying to see their point of view, adapting to it, and co-creating meaning. Failing to see a conflict as a process explains why some people are not interested in learning how to manage it. So, we don’t take a process view:

- when we see something as unchanging (e.g., he was a naughty child, so he is probably a problem adult),
- when we see something as having no history (e.g., nothing in your past is important or affects you today),
- when we see something at its present age only and not as a stage in development (e.g., you are always this way and will never change), or
- when we do not consider the ingredients that make up something (e.g., you do not consider how your goals, fears, and abilities, others’ expectations of you, and your deadlines or time limits interact to create how you view yourself).

We do not want to take such a static approach when discussing communication and conflict. Instead, we see them as dynamic, changeable, and moving toward some end. By combining the terms, we can define **conflict communication** as a process of exchanging verbal and nonverbal messages in a conflict situation that starts with antecedents, moves through steps, and ends with consequences.<sup>12</sup> We know that resolving conflict through communication does not end conflict forever, however much we might want that to be the case. We engage in conflict again and again, and we have a pretty good idea how these conflicts unfold.

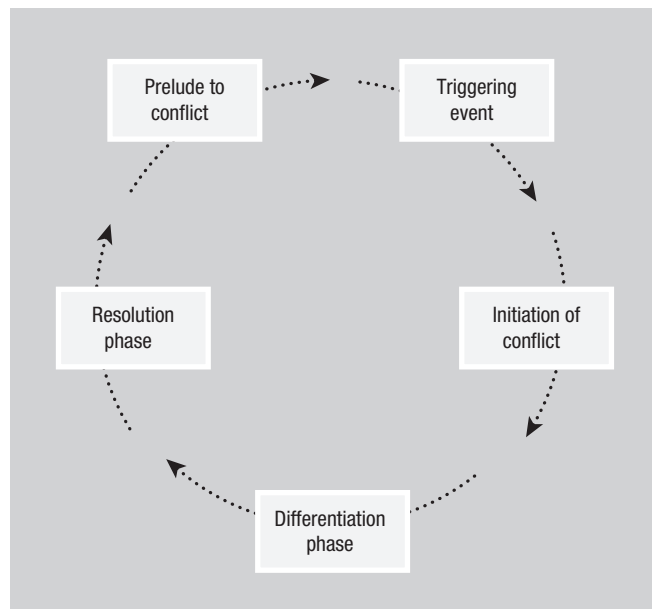
A **process view of conflict communication** has implications for how we view a conflict situation and conflict management behavior. Both are embedded in a series of instances that follow one another (as in a video of people meeting, talking, and departing). Such a view of reality reflects awareness that our lives consist of events influencing subsequent events.<sup>13</sup> When we learn to take this view, we begin to see situations and behaviors as phases or stages, reflecting a switch to a process orientation. If the series continues to repeat itself (like a perpetual motion machine),

it becomes a **cycle**. In some cases, conflict situations become cycles because they get bogged down in particular stages and repeat themselves. Effective conflict management consists of converting potentially destructive messages into productive conflict communication.

As depicted in Figure 1, a process view suggests that a successfully resolved conflict moves through a series of five recognizable stages, steps, or phases, with each stage affecting the next.

The **prelude to conflict** consists of the variables that make conflict possible between those involved. The prelude comprises four variables:

- the participants in the conflict situation (number, age, sex, etc.)
- the relationship between them (which may vary in closeness and distribution of power) and their conflict history



**FIGURE 1**

**A Process View of Conflict.** The process view of conflict assumes that all we have experienced prior to a particular conflict forms the group for the conflict we are currently experiencing. Prior experiences comprise the prelude to the conflict. A triggering event causes us to perceive that we are in a conflict with another person. After a triggering event, we (or the other person) will initiate the conflict through nonverbal means (withdrawal, silence, slamming doors, etc.) or verbal means (“we need to talk”). The differentiation phase includes working out the conflict, including the identification of the issue and feelings about it. The resolution phase includes the outcome to the conflict and becomes part of the prelude to the next conflict experienced.

- other interested parties to the conflict (including bystanders)
- the physical and social environment of the conflict situation (a party in someone's home, a meeting at work, dinner with family or friends)

In the prelude to conflict, the potential for manifest conflict exists because of the people involved and the other social and physical factors that define the situation. Like the first block in a line of dominoes, these variables affect the course of conflict.

The **triggering event** or conflict stimulus is a behavior that the parties in the conflict point to as the issue, problem, or focal point of the conflict. Examples include saying something upsetting, doing something offensive, or not doing something one is expected to do by others.

An important point to understand about triggering events is that the parties involved don't always point to the same behavior as the trigger for the conflict. For example, you may have experienced some long-term dissatisfaction with the way your roommate leaves his or her clothes and objects all over the house. For you the trigger of your conflict is the roommate's messiness. You finally say something to the other person and, in doing so, trigger a conflict for her or him about the other's perception of you as controlling. For that person, a conflict exists in which the trigger is your attempt to influence her or his behavior. While you both are experiencing one conflict situation, the behavior that each of you see as the trigger to it is sometimes different. In effect there are really two conflicts going on simultaneously each with its own trigger, one involving a roommate's messiness and another dealing with your dominant behavior. Your discovering this would be a good example of meta-conflict analysis. Having said that, we often engage in a single conflict where the parties can agree on the trigger. For example, a daughter is issued a ticket for texting while driving and her parents confront her about it. Both might agree in this case that she should not be texting while driving. So, sometimes the parties can agree that a particular event triggered the conflict.

The **initiation phase** or response occurs when the conflict becomes overt. This happens when at least one person makes known to the other that a conflict exists, such as reacting to another's upsetting comment, pointing out the offensive nature of the other's behavior, or reminding the other that she or he is expected to do something the person is not doing.

The **differentiation phase** or ongoing interaction pattern occurs when the participants use constructive or destructive strategies and tactics, presenting both sides of the story, moving back and forth, and escalating and de-escalating the conflict. Lasting anywhere from a few minutes to days or even weeks, this is the stage where the conflict becomes quite obvious. Although parties may view the open disagreement as "the conflict," from a communication point of view, the revelation of differences is the fourth stage in the interpersonal conflict process.

This phase serves a useful purpose by allowing both parties to explain how they see the situation that gives rise to conflict and what they want to happen as a result of the conflict. Sometimes, only one participant wants to address the conflict; the other person avoids confronting the issues. The relationship, the conflict history of the participants, and their preferred styles in doing conflict all act as ingredients that affect how the conflict proceeds.

The **resolution phase** or outcome occurs when those involved accept some outcome to the conflict. Ideally, a successful conflict results in a win-win outcome, where the participants are both satisfied with the outcome and put the matter to rest. Less ideal, the participants may decide that the issue is settled for the time being while recognizing that it may arise again in the future. The worse case occurs when a dominant partner decides the matter for both partners and acts as though the matter is resolved when in fact the partner is dissatisfied with the result.

In this text, we argue that conflict management may result in resolution or it may not. In some cases, the best decision may be to accommodate or avoid confrontation. In all of these cases, one is managing the conflict process. One manages the conflict process whether effective or not and whether the conflict is resolved satisfactorily or not. This text explains how to effectively manage conflicts to the mutual satisfaction of the parties concerned.

Regardless of the outcome reached, the way in which a conflict is managed affects the way future conflicts are managed between the affected parties. Thus, we illustrate the conflict process as a cycle, where the management of one conflict becomes part of the prelude of the next conflict. Again, this text focuses on constructive conflict management approaches.

When people are able to bring their conflicts to successful resolution, it reinforces positive thinking about conflict. Each successful conflict we engage in increases the chances that future conflicts are productive because we learn that conflict isn't dreadful and something we must avoid.

You should realize not all conflicts are exactly alike. Some may follow the five-step sequence of events faster or slower, and there is often an uneven distribution of time within the model. For example, the prelude to conflict may occur over several months and the actual overt manifestations of conflict happen in a matter of minutes or vice versa.

Moreover, from a process perspective, an unsuccessful conflict is one that becomes diverted at one of the stages. A conflict may begin to progress through the phases and stop, or it may return to a previous stage when new issues are introduced and added to the conflict. As in examining any communication event, the process steps may illuminate but also distort our expectations. The steps are used for explanation and analysis, not as a Procrustean bed into which all conflicts must fit exactly.<sup>14</sup>

Conflict communication is destructive or dysfunctional when it leaves the participants dissatisfied. Perpetual conflicts can produce perpetual problems in a relationship.<sup>15</sup> According to researchers, there are at least three ways in which conflicts may escalate and do harm to a relationship. First, the more excited and heated the conflict communication (in terms of physiological arousal, especially for men), the more likely the partners are to disengage from their relationship during the next few years. Second, some patterns of conflict communication (such as appeasing the other rather than engaging in conflict) are more disastrous to the relationship in the long run even if they appear more desirable at the beginning. Third, certain nonverbal behaviors during conflict communication (e.g., woman's disgust, man's miserable smile, etc.) predict relationship breakups later. The fact that certain communication behaviors and ways of dealing with

conflict are associated with relationship dissatisfaction and breakups necessitates a better understanding of conflict communication.

On the other hand, conflict communication is productive or it serves a useful purpose when the participants are all satisfied and think that they have gained as a result of the conflict. However, feelings about the outcome are not enough to determine the productivity of a conflict. Some conflicts, although uncomfortable in the short run, may serve the needs of those in the relationship in the long run, or may even serve others outside the parties' relationship or society at large.

This makes sense, particularly for people who are uncomfortable engaging in conflict communication at the outset. If, for example, you have a new roommate, and you find almost immediately that your personal habits are diametrically opposed, you might feel uncomfortable as you confront your roommate in order to find some point of agreement on your habits. Because you do not know the other well, the conflict communication may seem strained and awkward. Afterward, you may think you did not respond verbally in the best way possible. However, if you see improved changes in behavior over time, then we can conclude that the conflict was productive. You need to enlarge your view of a conflict to include not only the outcomes or results but also you and your partner's feelings about one another's actual behavior within the conflict itself as measures of effective conflict management. The following are two examples of how effectively managed conflicts move through the five stages:

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#### Example 1

**Prelude.** For the first time in about two weeks, my dad, brother, and I were all in the same place at the same time. We went to dinner together, giving us our first chance in weeks to talk together. We had just ordered dinner when the inevitable question came up. What am I going to do after I graduate? When the question came up this time, I had an answer. I told my dad about the progress I had made in job contacts and other possibilities I was considering. I especially wanted to travel during the summer with a sports team as a sports information director, but I had made no specific plans. Pop asked if I had sent in my application yet. I said that I hadn't.

**Trigger.** My older brother, Stuart, chimed in that I'd better do it soon. This is when the conflict started. The tone in Stuart's voice was what set me off. He was using a condescending attitude toward me, which I hate.

**Initiation.** I told him that it was none of his business; that he need not tell me what to do.

**Differentiation.** Stuart got mad, as usual, and told me that I was interpreting the situation wrong. He basically told me that I shouldn't feel the way I do because they were only showing that they care. This rubbed me the wrong way because I've had enough of people telling me how I should feel. I tried to explain how I felt but was interrupted several times with the response that I was wrong to feel that way. I told him that I thought I was being more than fair in telling my family my plans and feelings.

**Resolution.** At this point, my father intervened and made us both apologize to each other for making such a scene. We did and moved on to other topics that were safer to discuss.

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### Example 2

**Prelude.** Our daughter is not a morning person. My husband is one, but I am usually the one who drags her out of bed for school. The other morning I was having a hard time waking up, and I didn't worry too much about it because my husband was up and I didn't have to get up early. I finally got up just before my daughter had to leave.

**Trigger.** My husband remarked "I got Jenny up for you." That really irritated me, because when he says that it sounds like taking care of our daughter is a favor he does me instead of an obligation we both have.

**Initiation.** I remarked that it really bothered me when he said that.

**Differentiation.** He said that he realized that it would be easier for all concerned if he got her up this morning. I said I didn't like the way he said it.

**Resolution.** He apologized and said he didn't mean it the way it sounded. He appreciated that I usually got her up. He was just trying to reassure me that I didn't have to worry about getting Jenny to school. I told him I appreciated being reassured, but really needed to believe we were in this together. He agreed, and we dropped it.

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We believe that **destructive conflict** occurs when the parties do not manage a conflict in a way that is mutually satisfactory and does harm to their relationship. Moreover, when participants in the conflict lose sight of their original goals, when hostility becomes the norm, when mismanaged conflict becomes a regular part of the interaction between people, conflict is destructive. Most importantly, we characterize destructive conflict as a tendency to expand and escalate the conflict to the point where it often becomes separated from the initial cause and takes on a life of its own. Consider this person's account of poorly handled conflicts.

I gave one friend, Jason, an incorrect reason why another friend, Tim, was not going to have a drink. I told Jason that Tim had a problem with alcohol, which wasn't really true. When Tim found out what I told Jason, he got upset (understandably) with me, and we had a nasty argument, which continued to the following night. I remember yelling, swearing, flaying my arms in the air, kicking a chair, and accusing him of being from an alcoholic family (which wasn't true).

According to our view, destructive conflict occurs when there is an increase in the number of issues, number of people involved, costs to the participants, and intensity of negative feelings. It includes a desire to hurt the other person and to get even for past wrongs. Destructive conflict occurs when there is escalation and parties fail to consider their options. Lastly, destructive conflict places heavy reliance on overt power and manipulative techniques.

We believe that **productive conflict** occurs when a conflict is kept to the issue and to those involved. It reduces the costs to the participants and the intensity of negative feelings. It includes helping the other person and letting go of past feelings. Productive conflict occurs when there is no escalation and loss of control. It

features an awareness of options in conflict situations. Productive conflict does not rely on overt power and manipulative techniques. Along with these characteristics, we think that a productive view of conflict situations includes flexibility and a belief that all conflicting parties can achieve their important goals.

Productive conflict is distinguished from destructive on the basis of mutually favorable or unfavorable outcomes. We need to say more about the idea of outcomes, or the results people are seeking to achieve when they engage in conflict. Sometimes, these goals are clear at the outset, and at other times they develop as the conflict continues.

We realize that the term “outcomes” may suggest the resolution of some issue or solution of some problem. However, many people are satisfied even when these goals are not achieved. All they want from the conflict situation is for the other party to show interest in the problem; show concern for their feelings; and pay attention to their wants, needs, or interests, even if their wishes are not fulfilled. These are more personal, emotional outcomes that are associated with perceived fairness, acceptance as a person, and justice. There is a common understanding that complaints need attention from those responsible. In conflicts, both parties are anxious to tell their side of the story and want others to hear them out. If you take the time and make an effort to meet with me and show interest in my concerns, I may leave a conflict situation at least somewhat satisfied or feeling better than if you continue to ignore me or treat me badly. Better yet, you may make future decisions based on my recent input.

### Negative View of Conflict

Unfortunately, many conflicts fail to make it through all five stages and end with mutual satisfaction with the outcome. Our experience with conflict has made us wary of it. One of the challenges in getting people to learn more about conflict management is that people often do not even like to use the word conflict to describe their experiences, as this narrative demonstrates:

I don't have conflicts, because to me, a conflict is when you have no place left to go. I'm right; you're wrong, so let's forget it. Up to that point, I bargain or argue, but I don't have conflicts.

Even when we are able to recognize one when we are in the middle of it does not mean that we have begun to think about conflict as something that is potentially helpful. Conflicting parties often experience a curious tension; that is, they expect (logically and intellectually) to experience conflict but want to settle it as soon as possible so that their lives can return to “normal.”

What comes to mind when you think of interpersonal conflict? How would you complete this sentence: To me, conflict is like. . . . Would you describe conflict as like a war, battle, or fight? Would you say conflict is more like a struggle, an uphill climb, or a contest of wills? Is it like feeling sick to your stomach? Do you think of conflict as like being on trial, a day in court? Perhaps you see it as a game, match, or sport? Or would you describe it more as a communication breakdown, a barrier between you and another? Photo 1 shows one person's view of conflict: It is something that makes her feel bound and gagged.

Conflict is almost always associated with negative feelings. We know that many people do not feel confident about handling a conflict. In a study, researchers asked people to describe past interpersonal conflicts and found that they overwhelmingly used negative terms to describe their conflicts: “It is like being in a sinking ship with no lifeboat,” “like a checkbook that won’t balance,” or “like being in a rowboat in a hurricane.”<sup>16</sup> The participants in the study described their conflicts almost uniformly as destructive or negative, suggesting that when they effectively managed an interpersonal conflict, respondents did not think it was a conflict at all.<sup>17</sup> This is typical of a **negative view of conflict**: The idea that conflicts are painful occurrences that are personally threatening and best avoided.

To say what conflict is like is an exercise in creating a **conflict metaphor**, where you are asked to compare one term (conflict) with something else (struggle, exploding bombs, being on trial). Metaphors are not only figures of speech but also a reflection of how we think.



**Photo 1. Bound.** Amy Munive’s conflict art reflects her negative perceptions of conflict as something that renders her helpless and speechless.

How we think about something like conflict and the metaphors we may create for it create an expectation as to what can, will, or should happen, and the sort of emotions that might occur. How people think about conflict in general terms affects how they see their current situation, how they see the conflict issue, what choices they think are available to them, and how they view the other person's actions. You can know a great deal about conflict management, but if you hold a negative view of conflict your behaviors may be less competent when faced with one.

What do we learn from a collection of metaphors people give when asked what conflict is like to them? First, interestingly, we find that not everyone uses a metaphor to describe a conflict unless they are prompted to do so.<sup>18</sup> However, those who do so often use metaphors that are associated with the strategy used to respond to conflict: People who use negative strategies use more negative metaphors and others who are more passive use metaphors that reflect powerless feelings.

Second, we learn that not all people choose the same adjectives when describing what conflict means to them. People choose different adjectives to describe their perception of interpersonal conflict. These words reflect somewhat different views, which are themselves in conflict. Quite often a person who sees conflict as a "battlefield with relationships being the casualties" does not compare it to being on trial or a day in court, as another might. Probably, neither person thinks of conflict as like a basketball game, a tennis match, or some other sport. Although people vary in their perceptions of conflict, most seem to reject the idea that interpersonal conflict is a positive, healthy, and fortunate event—one they should welcome.

This common but negative attitude toward conflict hinders us from learning how to better manage our conflicts. Although people often think that they can learn new communication skills to improve the way they handle interpersonal conflicts, they do not realize that their attitudes, beliefs, and emotional reactions may have to undergo change as well.

Just as one can view a glass of water as half empty but another sees it as half full, so can we switch from a negative view of interpersonal conflict, where we see it as threatening, to a positive view. One woman reports her change in attitude toward conflict.

The most valuable lesson I have learned is that conflict is not necessarily bad. I no longer see conflicts as a danger to relationships. My acceptance of conflicts as the result of relationships has helped minimize the discomfort I feel in conflict situations.

This is a **positive view of conflict**, where *the effective conflict manager does not view conflict negatively, but rather sees opportunities to resolve problems and improve relationships with the people who mean the most in conflict situations*. The important first step in managing conflict is to adopt a mind-set that embraces conflict as an opportunity while recognizing the risks involved in it. Your other skills in conflict depend on your ability to transform how you think about conflict in general. Cloke remarks:

We can all recognize that in order to resolve our conflicts we have to move towards them, which is inherently dangerous because it can cause them to escalate. It is somewhat more difficult for us to grasp that our conflicts are laden with information that is essential for our growth, learning, intimacy,

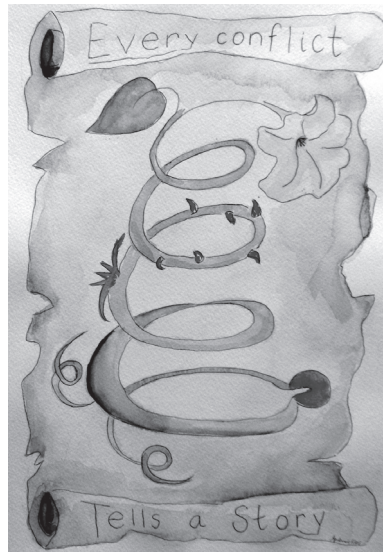
and change, that they present us with multiple openings for transformation and unique opportunities to let go of old patterns.<sup>19</sup>

This mind-set recognizes the importance of personal responsibility for one's actions and encourages flexibility in oneself and in others within the conflict situation. It also recognizes that communication works no miracles but that it usually helps when managing many of our conflicts. Most important, this mind-set rejects easy solutions and recognizes the complexity of conflict situations and their outcomes.

The conflict art in Photo 2 illustrates the Ideal Conflict Manager mind-set. It recognizes the inherent danger in conflict—there are thorns, and there are places where a person can get trapped. At the same time, it demonstrates the positive outcomes that can arise from conflict handled well.

### Learning to Respect Others: Civility as a Response to Conflict

Perceiving conflict as an opportunity to solve problems and improve a relationship should help us better manage many of our conflicts. Another challenge is getting people to realize that an important means of responding to conflicts across all contexts is mastering the habit of civility. Civility is not to be confused with simple



**Photo 2.** This watercolor painting by Lynn Palmer titled "Every Conflict Tells a Story" reflects a healthy view of conflict. There may be some painful spots involved, and there may even be places where the conflict is derailed or stalled, but overall, conflict yields positive results.

etiquette. *Civility* is constituted by an attitude of respect toward others manifested in our behavior toward them; that respect is not predicated on how we feel about them in particular. Civility requires that we are mindful of others around us and aware of the impact our behavior has on them.<sup>20</sup>

Is civility really a problem for us? The answer, unfortunately, is yes. One needs only to drive on an interstate, stand in a long line, deal with a government agency, or listen to people in a shopping mall to realize that civility is lacking in our society. The use of profanity is at an all-time high; according to a recent radio station's "guess what" game, the average American curses 70–80 times a day. Incivility is no stranger to the workplace, either. As Sutton points out, "many workplaces are plagued by 'interpersonal moves' that leave people feeling threatened and demeaned, which are often directed by more powerful people at less powerful people."<sup>21</sup> Sometimes, incivility becomes so intense that it is better characterized as bullying.

Carter's seminal work on *Civility* provides a perspective on why we have become so uncivil toward one another. He traces the historical development of books of etiquette, developed to help people get along in close quarters. Some of the earliest American writings on civility were proposed as guidelines to help people get along on railway cars, where they were in the company of strangers for long periods of time. The early writings were reminders to passengers that they were not alone on the train. They affect others by untoward behavior. As Carter points out, in many ways, we have become unaware of the fact that we are not solitary passengers through life. The relative isolation of our lives today, whether in our cars, our homes, or our communities, often leads us to act in ways that are rude to others.

Carter also indicates that attitudes and behaviors constitute civility, but he takes the idea a bit farther. Civility, Carter argues, "is the sum of the many sacrifices we are called to make for the sake of living together."<sup>22</sup> These sacrifices may include giving up the need to be right or the need to be heard in order to attain a greater good for the relationship, group, family, or organization as a whole. This does not mean we suppress needed and helpful conflict, but that we stop and think about whether speaking up really is necessary for the good of all. Carter argues that "a nation where everyone agrees is not a nation of civility but a nation withered of diversity. . . . When we are civil, we are not pretending to like those we actually despise; we are not pretending to hold any attitude toward them, except that we accept and value them as every bit our equals . . ."<sup>23</sup> In other words, how we treat others should be independent of what we think of them. Sometimes, it takes a while for people to catch on to this notion, as the narrative below indicates:

I have to work with someone who has been a thorn in my side for a long time. We have been on the opposite sides of most issues, and he has done some things that would get him fired anywhere else. To my dismay, I found that I would have to attend the same conference as he and be in his company for a week! I was not happy about it, and spent some time bad-mouthing him to one of my colleagues who was also attending the conference. He finally told me that if I was going to continue like that for the week, he

was going to ask for hazardous duty pay when we returned. I realized at that moment that I was turning into the kind of jerk I thought the other person was. I decided to try something different. I was nice to him the whole conference. I'm not going to tell you that I like him any better now, but being civil did have its own rewards. I wasn't anxious, I wasn't irritated, I was just polite. The colleague who formerly had said he wanted hazardous duty pay was amazed.

Given the importance of civility, what are the behaviors a person should adopt that reflect it? To begin with, civility is a way of being attentive, acknowledging others, thinking the best of others, listening, being inclusive, speaking kindly, accepting others, respecting their boundaries, accepting personal responsibility, and apologizing when necessary.<sup>24</sup> Troester and Mester offer five specific rules for civil language at work:

1. The best words to choose when caught in an unexpected, emotionally charged situation are no words at all.
2. Use words respectful of the specific listener to whom they are addressed.
3. Respect the reality of the situation by choosing temperate and accurate, not inflammatory, words when describing or commenting on ideas, issues, or persons.
4. Use objective, nondiscriminatory language that respects the uniqueness of all individuals.
5. Respect your listeners by using clean language all the time on the job.<sup>25</sup>

We close with some of the principles that Carter lays out in his book, as they provide the most wide-ranging set of assumptions that can help us to engage in civil behavior. As we discussed previously, the decision to be civil to others should not depend on whether we like them. Further, since civility is seen as sometimes sacrificing one's own wishes, that sacrifice must be extended to strangers as well as people we know. Civility is both a commitment not to do others harm and a commitment to do good for others. When we disagree, civility requires that we be honest about our differences and do our best to manage them rather than suppressing them or ignoring them. Finally, as Carter argues, civility requires that we come into the presence of others with a sense of awe and gratitude, rather than a sense of duty and obligation.

Civility is an important skill in our conflict management toolbox. We believe civility should be the primary skill people learn in order to function more effectively.

## **MANAGE IT**

Our goal in this chapter is to introduce you to the study of interpersonal conflict, defined as a problematic situation that occurs between interdependent people who seek different goals or means to those goals, which has the potential to adversely affect the relationship if not addressed and that there is a sense of urgency about the need to resolve the differences. Our definition broadens the study of conflict because nonverbal messages such as not speaking to one another can adversely affect relationships as much as verbal ones.

Although many people may not admit it, most people encounter conflict quite frequently. Conflict is inevitable—as relationships become closer, more personal, and more interdependent, more conflicts occur, trivial (minor) complaints become more significant, and feelings become more intense. Although conflict is inevitable, it does not need to get out of hand and perhaps turn violent because other options are available. We always have choices (or options) in conflict situations, and we are all responsible for our own actions.

Conflict management is the communication behavior we employ based on our analysis of a conflict situation. Productive management of conflict situations includes flexibility and the belief that all conflicting parties can achieve their important goals.

Competent conflict managers must recognize that communication is not linear and not simply saying what's on one's mind. Communication (and, by extension, conflict) isn't something we do to the other person, but something we do with one another (like teamwork or like a dance). The advantage of the transactional model is that we recognize the importance of both people's behavior in the conflict situation. One person acting competently in a conflict situation and using effective communication skills usually cannot bring the conflict to a resolution. It takes two people to make the conflict, and it takes two people to manage or resolve it. By taking both parties' behavior into consideration, we can better determine what communication option we should exercise in a given conflict situation. We can respond by avoiding the conflict, sitting down and discussing it with the other person, or reacting with aggressive speech or violent behavior. The best of these options is communicating about the conflict.

We may not realize it at the time, but constructive conflict communication is possible in most if not all problematic situations. Conflict communication is a process of exchanging verbal and nonverbal messages in a conflict situation that starts with antecedents, moves through steps, and ends with consequence.

The process view suggests that productive conflict communication goes through five stages. The prelude to conflict sets the stage by identifying the people, place, and time of the conflict. At the next stage, a triggering event functions as a stimulus, often leading to the initiation of conflict, followed by the initiation phase, which is the response to a triggering event. The subsequent differentiation phase is the ongoing interaction pattern in which most of the conflict communication occurs. Finally, in the resolution phase conflict participants ideally come to a mutually satisfactory agreement or outcome.

The problem is that not many conflicts result in mutually satisfactory outcomes or make it through all five stages. Therefore, conflict holds a kind of dread for us—because we know we have often mishandled it in the past. This negative view of conflict may lead us to avoid improving situations and interpersonal relationships; thus, we urge our students to adopt a more positive view of conflict.

An important part of communication to others is civility, which is constituted by an attitude of respect manifested in our behavior toward others. Remember that this form of respect is not predicated on how we feel about them personally.

## EXERCISES

### INTRODUCTORY EXERCISE

This exercise asks you to observe the conflicts you encounter over a week or more (see conflict records that follow). You may include recent conflicts that occurred prior to this assignment if you remember them in detail.

When recording your conflicts, keep in mind our definition of a conflict situation. Some students say they cannot do this exercise because they have no conflicts. This means that they do not understand this chapter. Remember that unexpressed conflicts do exist. For example, according to the way conflict is defined in this text, a conflict exists any time we would prefer to do something but give in to others and do something else, or we may simply avoid confronting others, which is a type of conflict. So, we actually may have more conflicts than we may think. In your essay, address the following topics:

- a. What do you think of the authors' definition of interpersonal conflict? (For example, you might start out giving the authors' definition and explain how well it fits with the conflicts you are presently observing in your life.)
- b. Would you say that it is inevitable to experience conflict with these individuals?
- c. In what ways were the conflicts productive and in what ways destructive?
- d. Conclude with a paragraph on how satisfied you are with the way you and the others handled these conflicts and any problems you have when attempting to manage your interpersonal conflicts.

### CONFLICT RECORDS

Instructions: Make 10 copies of this record. Over the next week or so, observe your conflicts and fill out a record for each one. After you accumulate 10 or more, you should review them to see how they compare with each other.

#### Interpersonal Conflict Record

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Time: \_\_\_\_\_ (AM/PM) Length of argument (time): \_\_\_\_\_

Topic/Issue of conflict:

How often has this issue come up in the past?

Rarely 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 Very Often

What actually started/triggered the conflict?

Description of the conflict: verbal argument, physical abuse, silent treatment/  
stonewalling, changed subject/made light of conflict, etc.:

Emotions you experienced:

How did it end?

Intensity of disagreement:

Low 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 High

Degree of resolution:

Resolved 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 Unresolved