

## Conflict Management and Mediation

**Conflict** is clearly a part of our everyday lives. Whether at home, school, or the office, people often differ with one another about what actions to take, how to implement them, or how to lead their lives. **Conflict** arises at the interpersonal level when two people have perceived incompatible goals, misunderstanding about their relationship, or different ways of assessing **and** behaving in situations. These disagreements arise in family settings, friendship interactions, **and** organizations. School **and** work settings have developed peer conflict management programs **and** workplace dispute resolution systems, respectively, to handle the personal **and** financial costs of escalating conflicts. Differences among groups in community problem solving also lead to ongoing conflicts in discussions about protecting the environment, urban development, **and** moral dilemmas over abortion **and** gay rights. At the national **and** international levels, differences in culture, religion, **and** territorial rights become sites of conflict amid constantly changing social, economic, **and** political conditions.

In general, people have a negative view of conflict **and** treat it as disrupting social **and** personal relationships. When individuals depict conflicts, they use negative images such as war, explosion, storms brewing, **and** struggles, as evident in statements such as "He *attacked* my point of view," "We met in a *battle* of the minds," "She *blew up* at me," **and** "Her anger was like a *cyclone*." These images cast conflict as abnormal **and** harmony as normal (Wilmot & Hocker, 2001). In actuality, conflict is not only inevitable but also normal **and** natural.

Other views of conflict treat it as a game in which people "bat ideas around" or engage in a "give-**and**-take exchange" to make a deal. Although the game image presumes that conflict is inevitable, it does not treat it as beneficial to society. Descriptors such as *helpful*, *enriching*, **and** *growth promoting* rarely appear in individuals' descriptions of conflict. **Conflict** is clearly a natural **and** important element in society because it forms the grounds for change **and** collaboration. **Conflict** aids in relieving tensions, generating creativity, correcting injustices, **and** balancing power. Treating a conflict as a *dance* that entails *learning the moves* or as a *dialogue* that involves *talking it over* **and** *understanding the other person* are ways to drop the negative images **and** promote positive attitudes toward conflict management. These positive orientations to conflict are vital for developing effective communicative practices in conflict management.

### Definition and Characteristics of Conflict

**Conflict** is a particular type of social interaction, characterized by opposite goals, interests, or values. For a conflict to exist, only one party has to see the situation as incompatible, even if the parties' goals are not truly in opposition. Moreover, the conflicting parties need each other to achieve their goals, or they would leave the situation **and** go elsewhere. Their need for each other means that either party could block the other one from achieving his or her desires. For example, John **and** Mary want to spend their vacation together, but they want to go to different places on their holiday. If John believes that they should vacation in the mountains **and** Mary wants to go to the beach, the couple may argue **and** decide not to take a vacation at all or to take their holiday separately. Both choices are unsatisfactory outcomes **and** block the achievement of spending their holiday together.

Since the two parties need each other to achieve their goals, they enter a conflict situation with a simultaneous mix of both cooperation **and** competition. John **and** Mary cooperate because they want to spend their vacation together; yet they compete in holding different, **and** presumably opposite, individual goals. Hence, to work

through their conflict, they must simultaneously compete while cooperating. This mix of opposite motives contributes to the tensions that push **and** pull on the parties during a conflict **and** lead them to find a balance between the opposing poles. Too much competition may lead to escalation of the conflict, while too much cooperation may lead to giving in **and** feeling exploited by the other person.

Engaging in conflict then is a balancing act. Like walking on a tightrope, the parties want to balance in the middle rather than swing too far to the left or to the right **and** eventually fall off the rope. Like tacking a sailboat, the parties need to capture the force **and** energy of the wind **and** steer the boat in the right direction in order to avoid being blown out to sea or losing control. So parties balance cooperation **and** competition to avoid escalating a dispute **and** feeling exploited.

Disrupting this balance also shows how a conflict becomes destructive over time. When this occurs, the conflict increases in the number of issues, the number of participants, **and** the costs that disputants are willing to bear (Deutsch, 1973). Issues begin to multiply **and** blur together, **and** disputants involve other resources to defend their positions. As the conflict escalates, the parties becoming willing to sacrifice more, take more risks, **and** hold fast to their original positions. As disputants lose site of their original goals, they engage in conflict interactions to win or to hurt the other party rather than to work through a problem; hence, destructive conflicts typically end in win-lose or lose-lose situations. In contrast, productive conflicts move in a direction of added flexibility, broadening learning **and** insights about each other, **and** increasing trust **and** respect. Productive conflicts focus on learning, growing, **and** developing new insights about complex situations.

### ***Communication and Conflict Interaction***

Another source of constructive **and** destructive conflict is the pattern of social interaction that stems from each person's response to the other party's moves **and** counter-moves. Social interaction refers to what the parties say to each other, the information they exchange, their nonverbal behaviors, the meanings **and** interpretations of the situation, **and** the nature of their communication system. In one sense, communication constructs conflict through the ways the parties develop patterns of interaction over time. These patterns form a set of messages in which one person initiates a concern **and** the other person responds to this message. This message-response pattern develops into habitual **and** repetitive ways of interacting that can become automatic or instinctive over time.

One pattern or sequence of messages that leads to a destructive cycle is a conflict spiral. For example, if one party threatens the other person **and** this individual follows with a counterthreat, the interaction develops into a competitive spiral that grows in intensity. Even an avoidance response, followed by continual withdrawal, can result in a conflict spiral, if the parties continue to ignore important issues **and** yet must act on them. Moreover, a destructive spiral acquires a momentum of its own. Each time the parties enter into a conflict, they draw from their past patterns to shape future actions. Once involved in a conflict spiral, parties struggle to break it **and** to avoid returning to it in future interactions (Folger, Poole, & Stutman, 2005).

Just as social interaction shapes conflict, conflict patterns rooted in society influence communication. Since conflicts arise from our lived experiences, issues of race, class, gender, **and** culture shape the language that we use, the positions from which we talk, **and** the symbolic meanings of who we are **and** how we relate to others. Thus, societal conflicts impinge on communication **and** shape particular types of social interaction that can develop **and** perpetuate expressed struggles. Overall then, conflict **and** communication exist in a reciprocal relationship. Social interactions shape the nature of conflict, while conflict **and** tensions in social settings impinge on communication.

### ***Goals of Conflict Management***

Communication is also the foundation for managing conflict constructively **and** effectively. Thus, one goal of conflict management is to develop communication competence to engage in conflict situations in constructive

ways. Specifically, being mindful of the process, knowing how to gain information from the situation, **and** making deliberate **and** conscious choices to avoid harming or exploiting others are important skills for managing conflict effectively. People who lack this competence to handle routine conflicts are more likely to rely on aggression than cooperation to attain their needs (Canary & Lakey, 2006). Individuals who are competent in addressing conflicts are flexible in their approaches, assess their situation accurately, **and** choose the behaviors that will help all parties in the situation. They follow appropriate rules **and** fulfill expectations, **and** they aim for win-win solutions or mutually acceptable settlements.

A win-win solution is one in which both parties get their needs met through the conflict management process. Each person sees the outcome as satisfactory **and** gets something out of the settlement; thus, the parties gain more from working together than if they resolve the problem individually. To apply this idea to the vacation example, John **and** Mary reach a win-win settlement if they decide to vacation at the beach this summer **and** go to the mountains for a vacation in the winter. This solution satisfies the needs of both parties, **and** John **and** Mary get to spend their vacation together. This solution, however, is satisfactory but not optimal. To reach an optimal settlement, the parties would have their needs met at the same time rather than delayed. Optimal settlements typically result from learning that occurs through communicating effectively during the conflict. They probe to find out what they want from a vacation **and** why; they explore underlying needs that might not be evident on the surface of their requests. Trading off different seasons to go to the beach **and** the mountains asks one person to wait to meet his or her goal for relaxation or recreation. If the parties continued to talk, generate alternative solutions together, **and** think creatively about the problem, they might discover different options. An optimal solution in this case would be to find a vacation spot in which both the mountains **and** the beach are available to the couple. In this way, both parties could have their needs met simultaneously rather than in a delayed fashion.

Another goal for conflict management is helping parties transform or change their situations. Transformation refers to using conflict processes to change the ways parties see the conflict, how parties view their relationship, or how parties relate to each other. Transforming conflict differs from traditional goals in that it focuses on the underlying relational **and** identity concerns rather than on solving problems or reaching settlements. Transformation also makes use of different types of communication, those centered on dialogue, clarifying understandings, **and** reflecting on relationships. Dialogue aims at working through difficult issues, exposing **and** discussing deep-seated feelings, **and** developing new social realities **and** relationships. At the societal level of ethnic **and** social conflicts, transforming conflict entails recognizing the humanity of the other person or group, creating a new moral order between the parties, **and** basing relationships on mutually beneficial arrangements (Ellis, 2006).

## **Types of Conflict Management**

The goals of developing competence, reaching satisfactory solutions, **and** transforming situations surface in three different types of conflict management: negotiation, mediation, **and** dialogue. The three types vary in definition, use, approaches for managing disputes, interaction patterns, **and** context issues pivotal to conflicts.

### ***Negotiation and Communication***

Negotiation refers to two or more people who work together to reach decisions, typically through exchanging proposals **and** counterproposals. A proposal refers to an offer that one party puts on the table as an option for reaching a settlement. The two parties exchange positions based on their estimates of the other party's behaviors **and** intentions; hence, negotiation is a strategic activity for making decisions about substantive issues in disagreements **and** disputes.

### ***Negotiation Use***

Initially commonplace in labor-management environments, negotiation was the primary way opposing parties

settled issues such as wages, fringe benefits, **and** contractual relationships. It has been a widely used forum in international diplomacy **and** trade agreements. Efforts in the 1980s to reduce U.S. emphasis on litigation led to inclusion of negotiation training in the college curriculum in management schools, in public administration, **and** in law programs. With these changes, negotiation became an everyday organizational practice, one used in legal transactions, environmental **and** regulatory arrangements, buyer-seller activities, customer relations, **and** mergers **and** acquisitions.

Moreover, negotiation infuses everyday activities in the family, the workplace, **and** community life as individuals work out role assignments **and** routine endeavors. In environmental **and** governmental situations, it has become a way to develop general rules on proposed policies in advance of engaging in an actual conflict. Overall, negotiation is no longer limited to formal conflict management. Rather, it permeates everyday activities; hence, communication plays a vital role in shaping negotiation processes **and** outcomes.

### ***Negotiation Approaches***

Distributive **and** integrative bargaining are two approaches commonly used in negotiation. Derived from Walton **and** McKersie's (1965) classic research, distributive bargaining refers to the process of claiming value or dividing resources, particularly when the pool of resources is seen as fixed or limited to a specific amount. In distributive situations, parties try to maximize how much they will gain in a situation **and** minimize how much they will lose. Negotiators argue for the benefits of their positions, manage the other parties' impression of them, **and** avoid revealing any information that might make them look weak. Buying a used car provides an example of distributive bargaining. In this situation, both the buyer **and** the seller want to highlight their options, withhold their bottom line, **and** try to persuade the other side to give in. Some approaches to distributive negotiation, such as continuing to hold firm on a position, attacking the other party, **and** pushing too hard for concessions, result in unsatisfactory agreements or in no settlement.

Integrative negotiation, in contrast, focuses on creating value **and** expanding the resources available for a settlement. In integrative negotiation, parties strive for a mutually acceptable settlement that provides gain for both of them; hence, they focus on what they have in common **and** ways to meet each other's needs **and** interests. Engaging in problem solving, seeking information about priorities **and** needs, making concessions, **and** supporting the other party's ideas exemplify integrative processes. These processes are likely to yield benefits for both negotiators. For example, the management of a company that is losing money might propose to downsize a certain number of employees. The union, in turn, might respond by recommending that the company reduce the salaries of upper-level managers. If the two sides engage in an integrative approach to negotiation, they might reach a mutually satisfactory solution through deciding to cut costs in production, proposing a program of early retirement, or requiring mandatory furloughs for everyone.

These integrative outcomes move away from both parties' original proposals. In the above situation, the parties share the common goal of company survival. As they discover this goal during the negotiation process, they realize that their original proposals would not be satisfactory to both sides, **and** they search for other options that would save money, help the company survive, **and** be mutually beneficial for both sides.

### ***Interaction Patterns in Negotiation***

Most negotiations are not purely distributive or completely integrative; rather, they entail a combination of both processes. Communication plays a vital role in defining how the two processes emerge **and** interrelate. Willingness to exchange information, especially about multiple issues **and** priorities of needs, is closely aligned with integrative processes, while arguing for one's position, asking for concessions, **and** debating the other side's options are typically aligned with distributive interactions. Both types of communication are necessary to attain individual needs **and** common goals **and** to avoid feeling exploited. Yet distributive tactics that turn into attacking the other side, locking firmly into position, or making excessive demands are likely to escalate the conflict **and** will result in no settlement.

Communication strategies, then, are also contingent on the ways negotiators respond to each other **and** on how their interactions develop over time. Specifically, in distributive processes, negotiators can avoid escalating a conflict by using strategies that complement rather than match the strategies of the other party. For example, if labor is arguing against management's position, then management might respond by defending their stance. This pattern of argument balances the communication **and** makes it easier to move to integrative negotiation. In marital conflicts, spouses who respond with submissiveness to their partner's dominant move or vice versa also balance each other.

In contrast, when negotiators match or reciprocate each other's aggressive or competitive tactics, they are more likely to escalate the conflict. Matching negative emotions such as anger or contempt, increases the likelihood of not reaching an agreement. When parties interrupt each other regularly or use deception, they strain their relationship **and** make it harder to negotiate an agreement. On the other hand, when both negotiators use first-person pronouns such as "I" **and** "You," give information about their priorities **and** needs, **and** talk in simple sentences, they signal a desire to move toward the other party **and** to work out their differences. Asking questions to make sure that parties understand each other is another way to break up a developing conflict spiral **and** move the negotiation in a constructive direction. Hence, it is important for negotiators to know how to alter or shift unproductive interaction patterns into productive communication.

### ***Context Issues and Negotiation***

These observations about communication presume that the parties are from Western cultures. Negotiators from different countries often rely on **and** have different meanings for communication in conflict situations. Specifically, individuals from Asian countries rely on the context to interpret communication in conflict. They use facial expressions **and** body movements to convey messages about priorities, whereas negotiators from Western nations employ direct statements, reject offers overtly, **and** express their opinions openly. Thus, communication patterns in negotiation often differ across cultural contexts.

Another context feature that shapes communication in negotiation is the role of technology as a medium for negotiation. Advances in communication technology over the past 20 years have resulted in negotiation through e-mails, videoconferences, telephone conference calls, **and** other computer-mediated interactions. Comparisons among these different communication media reveal that face-to-face negotiators are more likely to cooperate than are individuals who use the computer or the telephone for their interactions. When parties rely on computers to engage in negotiations, they use fewer words, cluster too many arguments together in one message, **and** have trouble identifying when the other party is cooperating. So negotiating via computers is challenging **and** works best when supplemented with some face-to-face interaction.

To improve negotiations that rely on computer or telephone technology, parties should be very comfortable with the technology before they engage in conflict management. They should use multiple modes of communication to exchange information **and** to clarify issues. They should monitor the give-**and**-take process carefully **and** avoid using language that triggers negative emotions.

### ***Mediation and Communication***

When parties fail to manage conflict through their own negotiations, they often turn to another person for help. Unlike negotiation, mediation is a process in which a third party assists the disputants in working through a conflict. However, mediators do not make the decision for the parties; rather, they assist them with the process **and** help them move toward a settlement. In most situations, formal mediators are impartial **and** have no prior relationship with either of the disputants, but informal mediators might be friends, roommates, colleagues, or managers who embrace the best interests of both parties. Mediators typically ask questions, guide the interaction, paraphrase or summarize remarks, set the agenda, encourage parties to make concessions, **and** provide emotional support to both sides. They differ in styles of interaction **and** the degree to which they exert control over the process.

Getting a third party to assist in managing conflict offers a number of benefits. Namely, it provides a cooling-off period for the disputants, helps them frame substantive issues, **and** redirects the interaction between them. Despite these benefits, though, overuse of mediation may encourage dependency on third parties instead of the disputing parties managing conflicts by themselves. For example, two coworkers who always go to their boss to manage conflicts between them may be less motivated to work out their problems on their own. Use of mediation, however, generally leads to high satisfaction with both the process **and** the outcomes of conflict (Donohue, 2006).

### **Mediation Use**

**Mediation** programs have proliferated in the past two decades, especially in communities that have dispute resolution practices connected to the courts. Mediators help with divorce settlements, intervene in disputes between landlords **and** tenants, manage controversies among neighbors, **and** facilitate settlements of disagreements about zoning **and** community development. In addition to community conflict management centers, school systems have implemented programs in peer mediation to help students prevent violence **and** manage conflicts among classmates. **Mediation** is a common practice for dealing with labor disputes, but organizations have expanded the use of this approach to address salary grievances, personnel issues, **and** interdepartmental conflicts. Moreover, mediation continues to be a widely used approach in international diplomacy, peacekeeping, **and** brokering trade relationships. Overall, mediation has become a standard tool in a repertoire of conflict management approaches.

### **Mediation Approaches**

Even though a wide array of approaches exists in mediation, they typically cluster into three types: (1) problem-solving models, (2) interaction management models, **and** (3) relational development approaches. The problem-solving approach, also known as assisted negotiation, focuses on addressing underlying interests **and** identifying common ground between the parties. In this approach, mediators often have a vision or a hypothesis for what would help the parties reach a settlement. They select their questions **and** strategies to search for common ground. For example, if a mediator thinks that poor communication underlies a problem, the third party directs questions to help the disputants diagnose their understandings. If the mediator uncovers common ground between the parties, the third party sometimes remains quiet **and** lets the disputants pursue their common interests. If the parties become contentious, however, the mediator may exert control through integrating the disputants' comments, charting an agenda, **and** making requests for concessions. The overall goal in this approach is to reach a mutually satisfactory settlement.

Mediators who adopt the second approach, interaction management, aim to distinguish between productive **and** unproductive communication patterns **and** to intervene in a conflict to move parties in a productive direction. They focus on messages that signal trust **and** liking between the parties, unequal power relationships, **and** the priorities or importance of issues. Through the use of questions **and** summary statements, the mediator moves disputants away from competitive patterns. One particular destructive pattern that surfaces in close relationships is a competitive dilemma. In this dilemma, the parties signal closeness **and** dependence on each other while simultaneously conveying disapproval **and** negative emotions. This competitive dilemma is evident when a divorced husband **and** wife come close together to negotiate a child visitation issue while they simultaneously convey negative emotions **and** disapproval that signal rejection of each other. The mediator aims to break up this competitive pattern, help the parties redefine their interdependence, **and** help them work out a specific visitation program (Donohue, 2006). The interaction management approach focuses on unproductive communication **and** how to help parties change their patterns of talk to work out agreements.

The relational development approach differs from the other two models in treating a person's identity **and** relationship with the other party as the underlying concerns in the conflict. This approach aims to empower the parties to discover the key relational issues that underlie their problems **and** to transform how they see each other **and** their situation. Some mediators use stories that disputants tell to help them decipher the different

views that each party holds about the conflict. Stories reveal the ways in which perceptions about the parties' roles as victims or offenders enter into narratives **and** how different plots **and** scenes play out over time. Mediators listen carefully to identify what is missing in the disputants' stories **and** to help parties use the missing elements to construct a new story, one that explores common issues **and** has the potential to bring the parties together.

Another option within the relational development approach is known as *transformative mediation*. In this approach, mediators help parties transform their relationships through improving their own empowerment **and** their recognition of the other party (Bush & Folger, 2005). Disputants typically enter into mediation with a focus on their own injuries or problems. They feel beaten down **and** victimized by the conflict **and** are often too paralyzed to act. Through granting them the capacity to take control **and** supporting them in this objective, mediators empower parties **and** help them develop the confidence needed to act on their own problems. Empowerment, then, opens the door to recognizing the other side's suffering. This mutual recognition builds compassion **and** empathy, which helps the parties listen **and** respond to each other. This approach purports that once parties address their relational problems, they can discuss differences on substantive issues with renewed cooperation.

### ***Interaction Patterns in Mediation***

The three models of mediation differ in the ways in which communication helps parties reach agreements. In the problem-solving approach, mediators exert control over the process by setting rules for interaction, summarizing, redirecting comments, **and** calming the parties. They paraphrase comments to check for understanding, raise questions about options for settlements, **and** direct parties to evaluate the options that they have generated. Since the goal of the process is to uncover common-ground issues, they direct parties to their major concerns **and** urge them to set priorities for what is important.

In a similar way, the interaction management approach emphasizes mediator control of the interaction but focuses on redirecting parties away from unproductive communication. Mediators listen to topics, issues, **and** arguments to hear underlying messages about warmth, friendliness, **and** respect **and** about how each party is trying to control the other. They use questions, summaries, **and** comments to move parties away from competitive behaviors **and** to change their destructive communication patterns.

The relational development approach shifts to disputant control of the interaction. Mediators let disputants tell their own stories, use the stories as windows for uncovering the underlying concerns, **and** get parties to think about alternative narratives that might include elements that are missing in the original examples. In addition to seeking agreements, mediators strive to get the parties to own their conflict **and** to create a new story in which disputants can avoid blaming each other for their problems.

In the transformative mediation approach, mediators empower the disputants by letting them control the process, helping them achieve what they want from the interaction **and** recognize the suffering that both parties have experienced through the conflict. They follow the parties' lead **and** occasionally interject comments that reflect substantive **and** emotional concerns. Mediators might ask if each disputant wants to add something that might change each other's views. After the disputants begin to listen to each other **and** feel empowered to manage their own conflict, the mediator might offer a summary of what he or she thinks the parties are trying to get across. In the relational development approach, mediators see their role as helping the parties become equipped to manage disputes on their own, work through difficult issues, **and** recognize the suffering that each party has incurred.

### ***Context Issues in Mediation***

These three approaches to mediation are applied to a wide array of settings, including divorce mediation, labormanagement conflicts, community **and** neighborhood disputes, **and** educational settings. Several

contextual features, however, influence the effectiveness of mediation. First, the nature of the conflict itself is critical to mediation success, especially in the problem-solving model. Conflicts that are highly intense or ones in which the parties are not motivated to find a settlement are hard to mediate **and** often lead to an impasse. The interaction management **and** relational development approaches are more effective in dealing with these intense conflicts.

A second contextual issue is the importance of mediator training. Training programs often emphasize one approach or a set of techniques **and** strategies. Mediators need to be trained regularly in the use of these approaches. They need to understand the principles **and** assumptions that underlie the different approaches to mediation **and** how to adapt the one they select to an array of conflict settings, including mediation with elders, workplace disputes, **and** court settings. Effective **and** continuous training aids in developing these skills. Finally, in some instances, mediation works most effectively when third parties are integrated into the community, exhibit the spiritual **and** moral values of the disputants' culture, **and** speak the native language of the disputants. Multiple mediators often work effectively in intercultural or gender-based conflicts in which diversity might be a central concern.

### ***Dialogue and Communication***

Although not as well-known as negotiation **and** mediation, dialogue typically involves third parties who act as facilitators in public conflicts. Dialogue emphasizes free **and** open expression of different points of view from multiple participants (Barge, 2006). It addresses conflict through creating new meanings for action that transform individuals **and** communities. By bringing oppositional groups together, facilitators help parties listen, begin to understand each other, **and** use critical thinking skills to develop courses of action.

Dialogue is particularly useful when parties hold fundamentally different values or moral positions (Pearce & Littlejohn, 1997). In most conflict situations, parties have difficulty addressing value disputes, **and** they rarely change their fundamental values; thus, dialogue provides a forum for engaging different value-based perspectives. The goal is to have parties move beyond polarizing other groups **and** to gain a richer understanding of complex issues **and** problems.

### ***Uses of Dialogue***

As a public process, dialogue resembles an old-fashioned town hall meeting in which parties voice their concerns about organizational, community, environmental, or international conflicts. Facilitators design a process that helps parties listen to multiple voices **and** creates opportunities to see their opponents in a new light. Then they generate new ideas, deliberate about the ones best for their collective needs, **and** strive to move forward in a common direction.

Problems that were initially treated as the domains of experts are now handled more effectively through dialogue **and** democratic participation. Specifically, land development concerns, planning **and** zoning controversies, community safety issues, **and** public school violence concerns are frequently addressed through participatory forums. In particular, dialogue provides prolife **and** prochoice advocates an opportunity to meet, develop common community concerns, work out options, **and** become engaged with policymakers (LeBaron & Carstarphen, 1997). Facilitators also employ dialogue to enable land developers, homeowners, regulators, environmentalists, **and** businesses reach a consensus in decisions about water **and** land use. Dialogue is also a type of conflict management employed in international circles, especially in problem-solving workshops that aim to foster mutual understanding in ethnic-political relations.

### ***Dialogue Forums***

A number of conflict management practices embrace dialogue as a forum. Two major approaches encompass an array of different dialogue practices. Public conversations entail programs such as the National Issues Forum, Study Circles Resource Center, Open Space, **and** the Public Conversations Project. These programs provide



ways to structure dialogue, give participants timely **and** relevant information, enrich conversations, deliberate on the pros **and** cons of actions, **and** move toward solutions.

The National Issues Forum has citizens read booklets on the pros **and** cons of important social **and** community issues **and** then involves them in small-group dialogues to identify common-ground approaches to problems. Similarly, participants in the Study Circle Resource Center meet in small groups for several months **and** then in large community meetings to develop action items. In contrast, Open Space is a self-organizing, completely open process in which participants create their own agendas, work in breakout groups, come together in large groups, **and** then meet in different breakout groups. The Public Conversations Project is the most structured of the four programs in that it develops ground rules for conversation. Participants construct a contract, discuss their topics in small-group meetings, **and** enact follow-up reflections.

The second main approach to dialogue includes programs grounded in appreciative inquiry. Appreciative inquiry emphasizes the positive aspects of organizational **and** community life through focusing on assets **and** possibilities. It works from past **and** present strengths to identify moments of excellence. The belief that governs this approach is that positive interactions as opposed to negative deficiencies energize participants **and** offer them hope. Once parties have hope, it is easier to transform a conflict into opportunities for beneficial action.

Two examples of dialogue practices that highlight positive interactions are The Public Dialogue Consortium **and** the Appreciative Inquiry Summit. Grounded in deliberative democracy, the Public Dialogue Consortium focuses on training participants to be facilitators, hearing voices from all stakeholders, framing issues in positive ways, **and** developing action steps. Facilitators report back to a large group, **and** then the process begins again with a new round of facilitators. Training participants to be facilitators instills an emphasis on strengths, positive outcomes, **and** possibilities for the future.

### ***Interaction Patterns in Dialogue***

These two approaches emphasize different interaction patterns for developing dialogue. In the public conversation programs, facilitators help participants listen actively, question each other, reflect on what was said, suspend judgment, **and** manage the tensions between advocacy **and** inquiry. To give everyone a voice, facilitators ask participants to share their stories **and** personal experiences before they deliberate about the pros **and** cons of alternatives. This approach also underscores the relational aspects of dialogue through urging participants to develop respect **and** to honor each other's comments.

The appreciative inquiry approach focuses on uncovering positive experiences **and** envisioning what might happen in the future. Facilitators typically conduct interviews with participants to discover the finest moments in the group's collective history **and** the core values of their community. Then, these positive moments are used to accent what is best **and** valued among community members. Next, participants address what should occur in light of the highly valued experiences gathered from the interviews. Communication consists of exchanging positive stories, reframing negative feelings into positive experiences, **and** drawing out visions of core values.

In both approaches, dialogue differs from the interaction patterns of persuasion, advocacy, **and** argument that characterize most conflicts. Dialogue privileges sharing **and** listening rather than arguing, admitting doubts **and** gray areas as opposed to setting forth airtight cases, asking questions out of genuine curiosity instead of trying to prove a point, **and** discovering deep-seated differences rather than presuming that parties understand each other. Dialogue is also fluid in that each comment simultaneously is a response to what happened previously **and** has potential to move the conversation in a different direction (Barge, 2006). Hence, dialogue is an emergent process, one that cannot be predicted from the participants' goals **and** intentions. It also builds collaboratively as parties respond to each other **and** create their situation together from what people say, how they say it, **and** how it develops over time.

Dialogue aims to transform individuals, relationships, **and** communities. Research on communication reveals three patterns that can lead to transforming of conflict situations: (1) labeling a problem differently, (2) using language that alters the levels of abstraction, **and** (3) developing new frames for understanding a situation. The ways in which parties label or name a problem relates to changing how they see a situation (Putnam, 2008). Each party typically enters a conflict with different views of the situation **and** different labels for the problem. For example, public school teachers might name differential pay between men **and** women coaches as a problem of *discrimination*, but administrators might call it *paying for different job duties* or differences in the amount of time **and** work between male **and** female coaching jobs. If the two parties rename the problem as *deficiencies in women's sports*, they might change the number of games that women play or involve more women students in sporting activities. This renaming of the problem allows the parties to close the gaps between male **and** female salaries because the job duties have also changed.

A second interaction pattern that fosters transformation in dialogue is the use of language that shifts the levels of abstraction. Levels of abstraction refer to the way words function in categories. For example, two owners might talk about the health of a particular dog named Dusty. Other ways they could discuss this issue is to talk about diseases specific to a particular canine breed or to the problems that older dogs experience in general. Each time they shift from discussing the symptoms of a particular dog to talking about dogs in general, they move from specific to general issues at a more abstract level. This movement back **and** forth across levels of abstraction aids in redefining a conflict because the shift expands or narrows the boundaries **and** opens up new interpretations of the problem.

To illustrate, two people from different organizations engage in a conflict regarding who is taking advantage of whom **and** which company takes the most risk in their work relationship. If they move away from deliberating about particular revenue issues **and** begin talking more abstractly about what risk means for their respective businesses, they have the potential to transform the conflict by developing a new understanding of risk **and** seeing that they can take risk simultaneously rather than sequentially. This process leads to developing creative alternatives **and** producing a new form of collaboration.

A third way to transform a conflict through dialogue is to help the parties develop a new frame for making sense of the situation. In communication, a frame is like marking the boundaries or borders for a set of events. Similar to a picture frame, it is a way of marking ongoing streams of activity that cross time **and** space **and** bracketing specific interactions out for close examination. Parties usually come to the conflict with different ways of framing the ongoing events that produced their situation. Then, they try to develop a common frame to make sense of events by talking about what should be included or excluded in their frames, what should be in the figure as most important **and** what should be background, **and** how conflict elements should be moved to construct a shared picture of the events. To reframe the situation, the disputants might enlarge the meaning of an event, project actions into the future rather than in the past, or remove elements from consideration in analyzing the conflict. These changes shape the boundary **and** definition of a dispute **and** may lead to reframing **and** even transforming the conflict.

### ***Context Issues in Dialogue***

As a forum for managing conflict, dialogue depends on a number of contextual issues—namely, creating an atmosphere of safety, the inclusion of relevant parties, **and** the fairness **and** competence of the process. An atmosphere of safety results from communication that equalizes power differences among participants. Facilitators aim to build trust **and** empathy among parties through shaping understandings in small incremental steps. They treat parties equally regardless of status or position **and** emphasize participant involvement in all stages of the process.

Inclusiveness is critical to dialogue **and** deciding who should come to public meetings, which representatives are central to the problem, **and** what voices should be heard can make or break effective dialogue sessions. Finally,

dialogue needs to be fair **and** competent. Fairness results from granting all parties a legitimate role in the decision-making processes, **and** competence depends on reaching the best alternative given the resources **and** opportunities to address the problem.

In summary, dialogue is a form of structured communication that emphasizes free **and** open expression of different points of view **and** using social interaction to transform conflicts. It is particularly effective for value-based, community conflicts in which parties hold stereotypic images of each other **and** feel alienated from decision makers. Two alternative approaches, public conversations **and** appreciative inquiry, focus on the communication skills of listening, questioning, reflecting, **and** deliberating. Public conversations also emphasize building common ground among participants, while appreciative inquiry works from positive achievements **and** strengths.

Both approaches draw on participants' stories **and** life experiences. Opportunities to transform conflict situations come from interactions that label or name problems differently **and** from those that discuss issues at both specific **and** general levels of abstraction. The factors that influence the effectiveness of dialogue include developing an atmosphere of safety, including all relevant groups **and** parties in the process, **and** attending to the fairness **and** competence of the process.

## **Changes and Future Directions in Conflict Management**

The role of communication in conflict management has changed radically over the past three decades. Communication is not just a set of tactics that people use to address conflict, nor is it just a style or way of approaching conflict. Rather, communication is the way that parties construct **and** shape the very nature of conflict through forming productive interaction patterns, preventing conflict spirals, **and** transforming conflict situations. Hence, communication is not simply a tool to use in managing a conflict; it is a way of understanding how a conflict evolves.

The growth of mediation **and** public dialogue programs over the past several decades attests to the need to develop procedures for managing conflicts outside the formal court system. Formal **and** informal mediation has grown in a wide array of arenas **and** is especially popular for managing custody **and** divorce settlements, neighborhood disputes, disagreements between landlords **and** tenants, **and** customer relations. Many corporations require human resource personnel to be trained in mediation or offer conflict management education for all employees. In a similar way, corporations have discovered that they can reduce lawsuits, eliminate workplace violence, **and** improve employee relationships by designing dispute systems. These systems have multiple points of entry to address problems, build in appeals for decisions, **and** emphasize open expression of concerns. Managing conflict at the public level is beginning to shift from reliance on experts to employing a public participation process. Only recently have these processes turned to dialogue **and** facilitation as opposed to public hearings in which audience members make statements to decision makers. Public dialogue also struggles to involve all the relevant parties, work with large numbers of participants, **and** develop forums that both control interaction **and** allow for free **and** open expression. Forums that are too freewheeling or too constrained can reinforce stereotypes **and** prevent the development of trust **and** empathy.

—Linda L. Putnam

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