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 sight 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, 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 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, labor-management 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-fashion 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

References and Further Readings


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