

Conflict Management Stages

11.3 Define and illustrate the stages of conflict management and explain how this model can be used in resolving interpersonal conflicts.

Conflicts are managed in various ways, depending on the specific conflict issue and the individuals involved. Nevertheless, several steps or stages in the conflict management process seem to be helpful to most, if not all, interpersonal conflicts (see Figure 11.2).

Step 1. Set the Stage

First, try to fight in private. If the conflict begins on a social media site, take the fight offline. When you air your conflicts in front of others, you create a variety of other problems. You may not be willing to be totally honest when third parties are

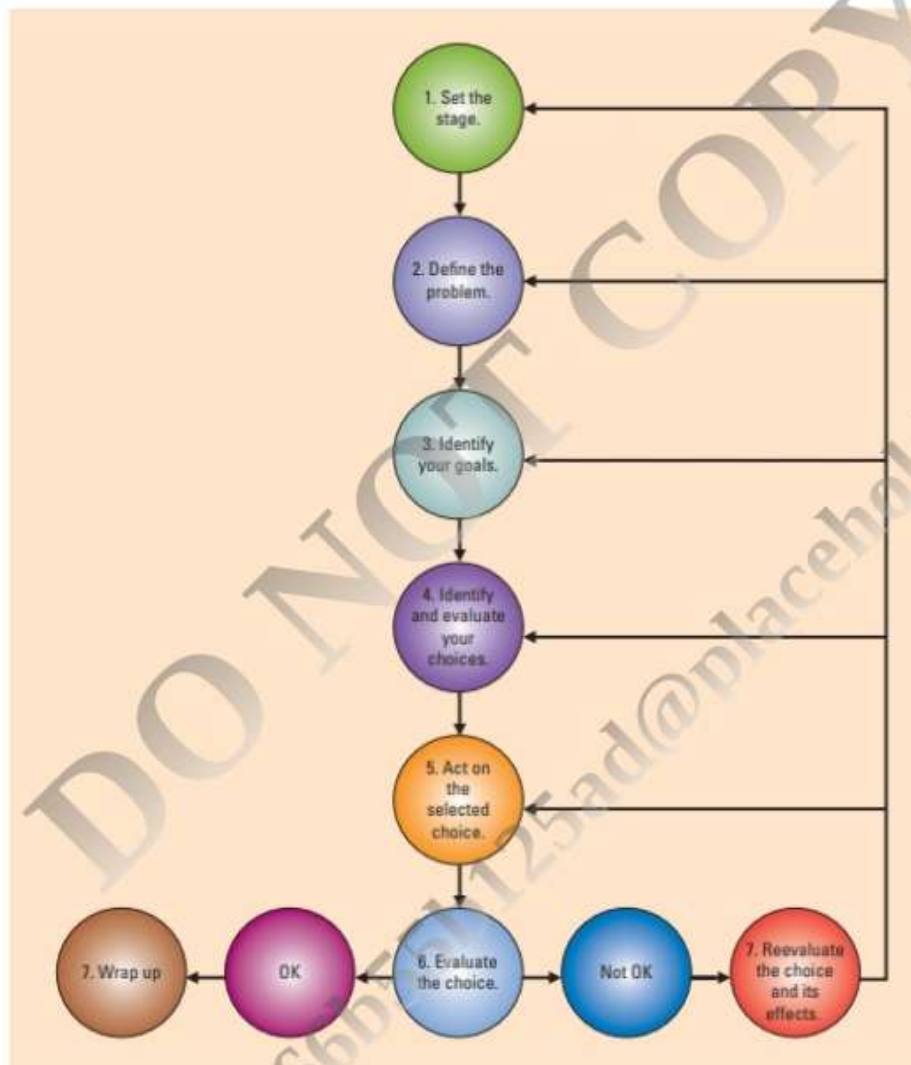


Figure 11.2 Stages in Conflict Management

This model provides one way of viewing and talking about the steps or stages involved in conflict management.

present or when others are reading your posts. You may feel you have to save face and therefore must win the fight at all costs. This leads you to use strategies that win the argument but leave the conflict unresolved. You also run the risk of embarrassing the other party in front of others, and his or her embarrassment may turn into resentment and hostility. Finally, on social media, you run an additional risk of having your posts circulated and even quoted back to you long after the conflict is settled.

Be sure you're each ready to fight. Although conflicts arise at the most inopportune times, you can choose the time to resolve them. Confronting your partner when she or he comes home after a hard day of work may not be the right time for resolving a conflict. Make sure you're both relatively free of other problems and ready to deal with the conflict at hand.

Fight about problems that can be solved. Fighting about past behaviors or about family members or situations over which you have no control solves nothing; instead, it creates additional difficulties. Any attempt at resolution will fail, because the problems are incapable of being solved. Often such conflicts are concealed attempts at expressing frustration or dissatisfaction.

Step 2. Define the Conflict

Once you've set the stage, you need to define the conflict. You need to know what you're fighting about. Sometimes people in a relationship become so hurt and angry that they lash out at the other person just to vent their own frustration. The problem at the center of this kind of conflict, for example, the uncapped toothpaste tube, is merely an excuse to express anger. Any attempt to resolve the uncapped toothpaste will be doomed to failure, because the problem being addressed is not what is causing the conflict. Instead, the underlying hostility, anger, and frustration need to be addressed. Here are several techniques to keep in mind.

- **Define both content and relationship issues.** Define the obvious content issues (who should do the dishes) as well as the underlying relationship issues (who has been avoiding household responsibilities).
- **Define the problem in specific terms.** Conflict defined in the abstract is difficult to deal with and resolve. It's one thing for a husband to say that his wife is "cold and unfeeling" and quite another to say that she does not call him at the office, kiss him when he comes home, or hold his hand when they're at a party. These behaviors can be agreed on and dealt with, but the abstract "cold and unfeeling" remains elusive.
- **Focus on the present.** Avoid talking about past grievances that have little or nothing to do with the present conflict. Often when one person delves back into past disagreements and conflicts, the other person will too. The result is two people arguing about past grievances with no real attention to the present problem.
- **Empathize.** Try to understand the nature of the conflict from the other person's point of view. Once you have empathically understood the other person's feelings, validate those feelings when appropriate. If your partner is hurt or angry and you believe such feelings are legitimate and justified, say so: "You have a right to be angry; I shouldn't have said what I did about your mother. I'm sorry. But I still don't want to go on vacation with her." In expressing validation, you're not necessarily expressing agreement; you're merely stating that your partner has feelings that you recognize as legitimate.
- **Avoid mind reading.** Don't try to read the other person's mind. Ask questions to make sure you understand the problem as the other person is experiencing it. Ask directly and simply: "Why are you insisting that I take the dog out now, when I have to call three clients before nine o'clock?"

JOURNAL

INTERPERSONAL CHOICE POINT

Defining the Conflict

Your romantic partner of the last ten years avoids your parents whenever they come to visit which causes problems between you and your partner, you and your parents, and your partner and your parents. How would you define the problem? What are some possible solutions? What are the pros and cons of each solution? What would you do in this situation?