

- Act and react honestly, spontaneously.
- Empathize with the other person.
- See equality; act as an equal. Avoid pulling rank.
- Be provisional; suggest rather than order or demand.

## Face-Attacking and Face-Enhancing Strategies: Politeness in Conflict

As you might have guessed, politeness has special relevance to interpersonal conflict. **Face-attacking conflict strategies** are those that attack a person's positive face (for example, comments that criticize the person's contribution to a relationship or any of the person's abilities) or a person's negative face (for example, making demands on a person's time or resources or comments that attack the person's autonomy). **Face-enhancing conflict strategies** are those that support and confirm a person's positive face (praise, a pat on the back, a sincere smile) or negative face (giving the person space and asking rather than demanding).

One popular but destructive face-attacking strategy is **beltlining** (Bach & Wyden, 1968). Much like fighters in a ring, each of us has a "beltline" (here, an emotional one). When you hit below this emotional beltline, you can inflict serious injury. When you hit above the belt, however, the person is able to absorb the blow. With most interpersonal relationships, especially those of long standing, you know where the beltline is. You know, for example, that to hit Kristen or Matt with the inability to have children is to hit below the belt. You know that to hit Jack or Jill with the failure to get a permanent job is to hit below the belt. This type of face-attacking strategy causes all persons involved added problems.

Another such face-attacking strategy is **blame**. Instead of focusing on a solution to a problem, some members try to affix blame on the other person. Whether true or not, blaming is unproductive; it diverts attention away from the problem and from its potential solution, and it creates resentment that is likely to be responded to with additional resentment. The conflict then spirals into personal attacks, leaving the individuals and the relationship worse off than before the conflict was ever addressed.

Strategies that enhance a person's self-image and that acknowledge a person's autonomy will not only be polite, but they're likely to be more effective than strategies that attack a person's self-image and deny a person's autonomy. Even when you get what you want, it's wise to help the other person retain positive face because it makes it less likely that future conflicts will arise (Donohue & Kolt, 1992).

Instead of face-attacking, try face-enhancing strategies:

- Use messages that enhance a person's self-image.
- Use messages that acknowledge a person's autonomy.
- Compliment the other person even in the midst of a conflict.
- Make few demands, respect another's time, give the other person space especially in times of conflict.
- Keep blows to areas above the belt.
- Avoid blaming the other person.
- Express respect for the other's point of view even when it differs greatly from your own.



### VIEWPOINTS: The Importance of Face

Cultures vary widely in how important they consider face. How important is it to maintain face in a conflict situation in your culture and the cultures with which you're familiar?

## Verbal Aggressiveness and Argumentativeness

An especially interesting perspective on conflict has emerged from work on verbal aggressiveness and argumentativeness, concepts developed by communication researchers that have quickly spread to other disciplines—such as psychology, education, and management, among others (Infante, Rancer, & Avtgis, 2010; Rancer & Avtgis, 2006). Understanding these two concepts will help you understand some of the reasons why things go wrong and some of the ways in which you can use conflict to improve rather than damage your relationships.

**VERBAL AGGRESSIVENESS** Verbal aggressiveness is an unproductive conflict strategy in which a person tries to win an argument by inflicting psychological pain, by attacking the other person's self-concept (Infante & Wigley, 1986; Rancer & Avtgis, 2006). The technique is a type of disconfirmation in that it seeks to discredit the individual's view of self. The verbally aggressive individual is likely to

- attack the character of the other person.
- insult the other person; post an unflattering photo.
- lose his or her temper during a dispute; write really negative comments on someone's wall for all to see.
- make fun of others.
- yell and scream.
- make the other person feel unreasonable or stupid or defensive.

Now, let's consider the alternative, argumentativeness.

**ARGUMENTATIVENESS** Argumentativeness refers to your willingness to argue for a point of view, your tendency to speak your mind on significant issues. It's the mode of dealing with disagreements that is the preferred alternative to verbal aggressiveness.

As you can appreciate, argumentativeness differs greatly from verbal aggressiveness. Argumentativeness is constructive; the outcomes are positive in a variety of communication situations (interpersonal, group, organizational, family, and intercultural). Verbal aggressiveness is destructive; the outcomes are negative.

Argumentativeness leads to relationship satisfaction, and even in organizations, it enhances relationships between subordinates and supervisors. Aggressiveness, on the other hand, leads to relationship dissatisfaction, and in an organization, it demoralizes workers on many levels of the hierarchy.

Argumentative individuals are generally seen as having greater credibility; they're seen as more trustworthy, committed, and dynamic than their aggressive counterparts. In addition, argumentativeness is likely to increase your power of persuasion and will also increase the likelihood that you'll be seen as a leader. Aggressiveness tactics, on the other hand, decrease your power and your likelihood of being seen as a leader.

Instead of verbal aggressiveness, consider the more effective argumentativeness:

- Treat disagreements as objectively as possible; avoid assuming that because someone takes issue with your position or your interpretation, they're attacking you as a person.



### VIEWPOINTS: Relationship Violence

One of the most puzzling findings on violence is that many victims interpret it as a sign of love. These victims see being beaten or verbally abused as a sign that their partner is fully in love with them. And, many of these victims blame themselves for the violence instead of blaming their partners (Gelles & Cornell, 1985). *How do the people you know respond to violence or verbal abuse?*