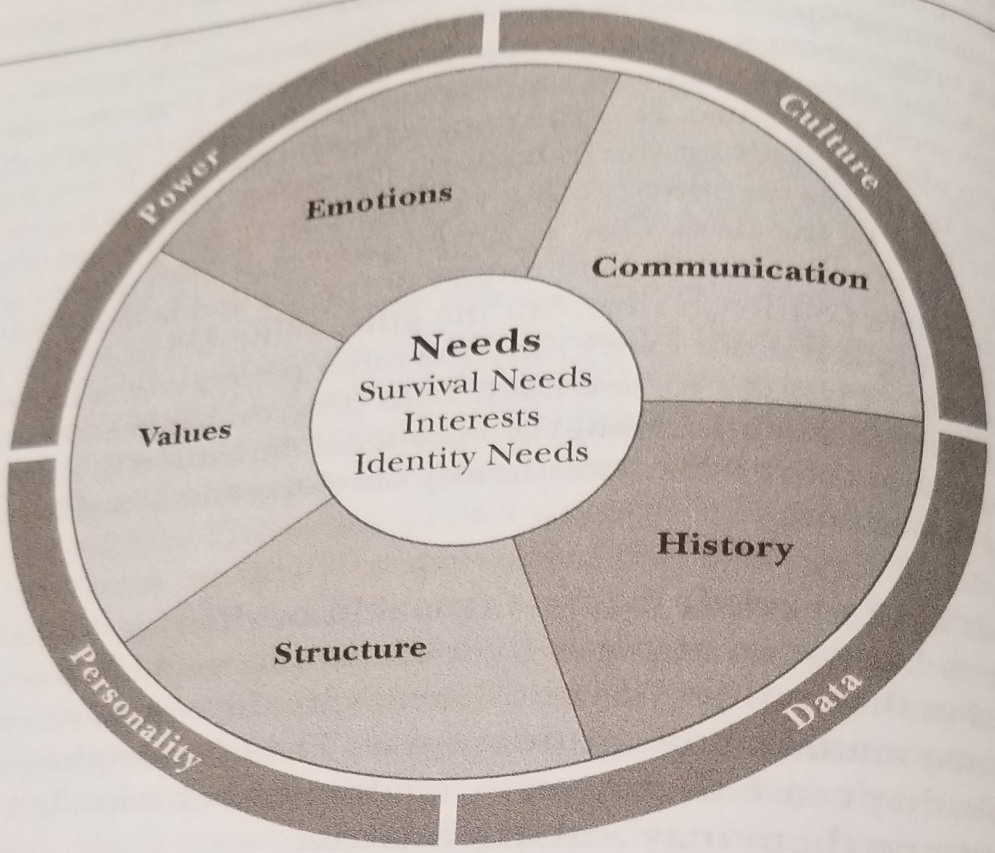
What Causes Conflict?

Conflict has multiple sources, and theories of conflict can be distinguished from one another by which origin they emphasize. Conflict is seen as arising from basic human instincts, from competition for resources and power, from the structure of the societies and institutions people create, from flawed communication, and from the inevitable struggle between classes. Although most of these theories offer valuable insights and perspectives on conflict, they can easily point us in different directions as we seek a constructive means of actually dealing with conflict. What we need is a practical framework that helps us use some of the best insights of different conflict theories.

If we can understand and locate the sources of conflict, we can create a map to guide us through the conflict process. When we

FIGURE 1.1 WHEEL OF CONFLICT



understand the different forces that motivate conflict behavior, we are better able to create a more nuanced and selective approach to handling conflict. Different sources of conflict produce different challenges for conflict engagement. The wheel of conflict, illustrated in Figure 1.1, is one way of understanding the forces that are at the root of most conflicts. This conceptualization of the sources of conflict arose out of my work as a conflict practitioner and conversations with colleagues at CDR Associates and elsewhere, and it is derivative of the circle of conflict developed by Christopher Moore (2003). Moore's circle consists of five components: relationship problems, data problems, value differences, structural problems, and interests. This has proven a valuable tool for analyzing the sources of conflict, but I have chosen to rework it to reflect a broader view of human needs and the issues that make it hard for us to directly address these needs.

Human needs are at the core of all conflicts. People engage in conflict either because they have needs that are met by the conflict process itself or because they have needs that they can only attain (or believe they can only attain) by engaging in conflict. I discuss the system of human needs in detail later in this chapter. My point here is that people engage in conflict because of their needs, and conflict cannot be transformed or resolved unless these needs are addressed in some way. We should not understand needs as static and unchanging. We all have a range of needs, but how we experience these is influenced by the context and the unfolding interaction. For example, I might start negotiating to sell a house mostly concerned about money, timing, and certainty, but if the hard work I have done to remodel my home is dismissed as sloppy or in poor taste, then I might suddenly find myself more concerned with issues of identity, pride, and self-image. In this way, the needs we experience are constantly evolving and changing as we interact with others.

Needs are embedded in a constellation of contextual factors that generate and define conflict. To effectively address needs, it is usually necessary to work through some of these elements, which affect how people experience their needs and how they choose to pursue them. Five of these factors are particularly critical to understanding how conflict unfolds: the ways in which people communicate, their emotions, their values, the structures in which they interact, and history (see Figure 1.1). Let's examine each of these sources further.

COMMUNICATION

We are very imperfect communicators. Sometimes this imperfection generates conflict, whether or not there is a significant incompatibility of interests, and it almost always makes conflict harder to deal with effectively. Sometimes, however, imperfect communication is what allows us to work together in the face of serious differences (Honeyman, 2006). Unclear communication allows us to move forward despite our differences by obscuring disagreements or different interpretations of agreements. Although this can eventually cause worse conflict, sometimes it allows us to get through a particularly problematic interaction successfully.

Human communication has inspired a large literature and multiple fields of study, and I will discuss the role of communication in conflict and conflict intervention in Chapter Seven. The main thing to consider here is how hard it is for individuals to communicate about complex matters, particularly under emotionally difficult circumstances. We should keep reminding ourselves just how easy it is for communication to go awry. Conflict frequently escalates because we act on the assumption that we have communicated or understood someone else's communication accurately when we have not. When we learn that others are acting on the basis of different information and assumptions, we often attribute this to bad faith or deviousness and not to the imperfections of human communication.

Many factors may contribute to communication problems. Culture, gender, age, class, cognitive capacity, and environment have a large impact on communication. We frequently rely on inaccurate or incomplete perceptions, form stereotypes, and carry into our communication conclusions drawn from former interactions or experiences. Often we are inclined to try to solve problems before we understand them. The greater the duress we are under, the harder it is for us to communicate effectively (and often the more important it is as well). Sometimes communication takes more energy and focus than we are able or willing to give at a critical point, and it is easy to become discouraged or hopeless about communicating effectively in serious conflicts.

Successful communication requires that people enter into a de facto partnership with each other in which informal but powerful norms and strategies are developed to allow communication to occur. This involves a reciprocal process of sending and receiving messages about how to communicate, what is working in an interchange, and how to adjust communication to make it work better. This process of metacommunication (communicating about communicating) is seldom intentional or conscious, but it is nonetheless critical—and takes place in all types of communication, ranging from formal business interactions to parent-child interchanges (Tannen, 1986). When this process works, very effective interactions can occur, even in the midst of conflict, but when communication is dysfunctional even the simplest of interactions can become extremely difficult and conflictual. This is

one example of why conflict has to be understood in terms of the nature of the interaction that is created, and not simply the tools or approach of each of the individual parties involved.

Despite all these problems, we can and do find a way to communicate, and we can work on improving our communication, even in very intense conflicts. Communication is one of the greatest sources of both difficulty and hope in dealing with serious conflicts.

Emotions

Emotions are the energy that fuels conflict. If we could always stay perfectly rational and focused on how best to meet our needs and accommodate those of others, and if we could calmly work to establish effective communication, then many conflicts either would never arise or would quickly de-escalate. But of course that is not human nature. At times emotions seem to be in control of behavior. Sometimes they are also a source of power. They contribute to the energy, strength, courage, and perseverance that allow us to participate forcefully in conflict.

Emotions are generated both by particular interactions or circumstances and by previous experiences. When someone points a finger in our face in a conflict, we have a reaction based on the immediate context and meaning of that behavior, but we may also be reacting to all the times in the past when that gesture has been made at us in anger.

Disputants often find it necessary to work on the emotional content of their experience to make progress. Conflict may provide a valuable opportunity to engage with the emotions that are otherwise suppressed or ignored. Dealing with the intense emotions often associated with conflict usually requires finding some opportunity to express and release emotions and to experience someone else's understanding and empathy. We often talk about the need to ventilate, to let an emotion out through a direct and cathartic expression of it. Frequently, however, ventilation is neither possible nor desirable. A direct display of feelings can escalate a conflict. Instead it can be more constructive for disputants to discuss feelings without demonstrating them, to work toward establishing a safe environment for the expression of emotions, to let emotions out in safe increments, or to express them to a

third party rather than directly to the other person. Sometimes (although this may go against some popular beliefs of our culture), the wisest course is to contain our feelings until a more appropriate opportunity for dealing with them presents itself. But of course sometimes this is not at all the wisest course. We often try to shut down an emotional interchange because we are afraid that a situation will spin out of control or because we feel unable to deal with the intensity of the feelings being expressed. Sometimes, however, such an exchange is exactly what is needed, and one of the best services interveners can offer is to provide a safe container for the expression of intense feelings. Judging when an expression, description, or exchange of feelings is called for, and when a more circumscribed approach to the emotional content of a dispute is the wiser approach, may be one of the most difficult but important decisions we make in dealing with conflict.

Emotions fuel conflict, but they are also a key to de-escalating it. Many emotions can prevent, moderate, or control conflict. Part of everyone's emotional makeup is the desire to seek connection, affirmation, and acceptance. The genuine expression of sadness or concern by a party to a dispute can be essential to addressing the conflict effectively. A challenge for interveners in many conflicts is finding an adequate way to deal with the feelings of all participants so that these are neither ignored nor allowed to escalate out of control. Sometimes it may be necessary to let a conflict escalate somewhat, enough to deal with emotions but not so much as to impair people's ability to eventually address the situation constructively. The art of dealing with conflict often lies in finding the narrow path between the useful expression of emotions and destructive polarization. This is one reason why it is often helpful to employ the services of a third party.

VALUES

Values are the beliefs we have about what is important, what distinguishes right from wrong and good from evil, and what principles should govern how we lead our lives. When a conflict is defined or experienced as a struggle about values, it becomes more charged and intractable. Because we define ourselves in part through our core beliefs, when we believe these values are under attack, we

feel that *we* are being attacked. Similarly, it is hard for us to compromise when our core beliefs are in play because we feel we are compromising our sense of integrity and self.

Although some conflicts are inescapably about fundamental value differences, more often disputants have a choice about whether they will define a conflict in this way. When we feel unsure of ourselves, confused about what to do, or under attack, it is tempting to define an issue as a matter of right or wrong. This empowers and fortifies us, allowing us to "take the moral high road," even as it rigidifies our thinking and narrows acceptable options. Often it is easier to carry on a conflict if we can view ourselves as honorable and virtuous, and opponents as evil, malicious, and dangerous. This stance, comforting though it may be, tends to escalate and perpetuate conflict. Complicated public conflicts (for example, debates about health care policy, climate change, or the economy) are often characterized by extreme, almost fantastical appeals to values, as if the issue involved were a choice of good versus evil or democracy versus dictatorship rather than a debate about the merits of different approaches to dealing with complicated problems. This appeal to values builds support for a position and energizes people, but it also makes a constructive debate much more difficult.

When value differences are genuinely and inescapably a core element of a conflict, we are unlikely to easily find our way through the conflict by employing a rational problem-solving process. We can often determine if this is the case by articulating the relevant values and beliefs that we think are in play, and doing so in affirmative terms (what people believe in rather than what they don't believe in). If the most significant values of those involved are clearly in opposition (and this is the case far less often than we might think), then we are not likely to end the conflict through a process of compromise or creative problem solving. We may be able to arrive at some understanding about how to move forward, despite value differences, but the core conflict will probably remain until circumstances change, larger values intervene, or those involved modify their core beliefs in some way.

Although values are often a source of conflict and an impediment to its resolution, they can also be a source of commonality and a constraint on conflict escalation. Disputants usually can

find some level on which they share values. And often they have values about interpersonal relations that support collaborative efforts. Recognizing when values are in play in conflict is critical to moving the conflict in a constructive direction. When individuals address values directly and express their beliefs affirmatively, they can address conflict more constructively.

STRUCTURE

The structure or framework within which an interaction takes place or an issue develops is another source of conflict. Structural components of conflict include available resources, decision-making procedures, time constraints, legal requirements, communication mechanisms, and physical settings. Even when compatible interests might move people toward a more cooperative stance, the structure in which they are working may promote conflict. An example of this is the litigation process. Litigation is well designed for achieving a decisive outcome when other, less adversarial procedures have not worked. However, it is also a structure that exacerbates conflict, makes compromise difficult, and casts issues as win-lose, right-wrong struggles. Voting is another interesting example. When voting is used to resolve serious differences about an issue, the issue tends to become polarized, and constructive communication can become difficult. Candidates for office often try to seize the center of the political spectrum on important issues, but at the same time they look for so-called wedge issues that can differentiate them from their rivals and build support, they hope, among a large segment of voters. This approach to campaigns increases divisiveness about such complex issues as affirmative action, abortion, gun control, economic policy, climate change, national security, or health care in a way that makes a constructive and nuanced approach to policymaking difficult.

Sometimes these structural realities can be changed through a conflict resolution process. Often, however, part of what that process must accomplish is to help disputants identify and accept those structural elements that are unlikely to be altered. It is also important to consider system dynamics. Structure is one important element of a conflict system, and it is often profitable to consider how system dynamics are expressed in conflict. Conflict

can be understood as an inevitable and necessary expression of human systems and an important means by which systems maintain their adaptability and adjust to change. Of course, conflict can also be very dysfunctional for systems if not dealt with effectively. Understanding how complex adaptive systems operate—and in particular how energy flows through systems; how systems emerge, adapt, adjust, and reorganize; and how conflict in one part of a system may be an expression of system dynamics or conflicts in another part of the same system—can be critical to how we intervene in a conflict (Innes and Booher, 1999; Jones and Hughes, 2003). The wheel of conflict can be viewed as one approach to understanding the components of a conflict system.

CHAPTER 2

Cognitive Variables

Cognitive variables describe differences in how people make sense of conflict, how they present their ideas and needs, and how they approach the problem-solving process.

Analytical Versus Intuitive

The analytical style is characterized by the use of logical reasoning and data analysis. Individuals attempt to weigh costs, benefits, and choices and to consider issues one at a time. Individuals using the intuitive approach rely more on perceptions, insights, and feelings as guides to how to proceed.

Linear Versus Holistic

A linear style is characterized by taking issues one at a time and considering facts, options, costs, and benefits sequentially. In the linear style of communication, one person speaks at a time and one subject is considered at a time. People employing a holistic style consider many issues simultaneously and move around easily among a focus on interests, an expression of feelings, a consideration of solutions, and a discussion of issues. In holistic communication, people may speak about several different things at once.

Integrative Versus Distributive

The integrative style promotes a focus on common interests and opportunities for joint gain. People exhibiting this style have a tendency to think in terms of maximizing everyone's satisfaction. Disputants with a distributive style focus more on how to divide existing benefits among disputants and are usually particularly oriented to determining how to maximize their own gain or minimize their loss.

Outcome Focused Versus Process Focused

Many people focus primarily on outcomes in conflict. They want to figure out what is going to be done and when. Others are more concerned about the process of the interaction.

Emotional Variables

Emotional variables describe people's attitudes and feelings concerning conflict and how they handle these in conflict.

Enthusiastic Versus Reluctant

People have widely different tolerances for being in conflict. Some are "conflict junkies" who feel most alive and engaged in the middle of a conflict. I can recall many meetings in which someone (sometimes me) has decided to liven things up by starting a conflict. Some individuals seem to feel that any current or potential conflict must be raised at every opportunity, and that if they are not in conflict they are not fully alive. Most of us, however, are at least somewhat reluctant or fearful about being in conflict, and as a result occasionally use several of the avoidance strategies described earlier. Sometimes people will go to great extremes to maintain their distance or minimize their participation in a conflict and to avoid having any direct interaction with anyone with whom they are in conflict.

Risk Taking Versus Risk Averse

The major goal for some in conflict is to minimize risk or potential harm. For others the primary goal is to maximize the possible benefits that might be accrued. The former's approach to conflict is characterized by caution, the latter's by risk taking.

Emotional Versus Rational

The emotional and the rational are not necessarily opposite as personality traits. In conflict, however, some people are more likely to be emotionally expressive and to focus on their feelings, whereas others are more likely to concentrate on employing an ostensibly logical process to work through the conflict.

Volatile Versus Unprovocable

Some people seem to remain consistently calm, even, and not easily provoked in conflict, whereas others seem always on the edge of a temper tantrum or emotional meltdown. Individuals often become less volatile as they mature or develop their interpersonal skills.

BEHAVIORAL VARIABLES

An enormous number of variables could be identified to describe our different behavioral tendencies in conflict, ranging from our overall demeanor to our particular responses to specific situations. The following seem to be particularly pertinent to the different individual approaches we see in conflict:

Direct Versus Indirect

Some people assert their needs, issues, or feelings directly and openly, and others express them indirectly through surrogate issues, metaphors, or third parties. There are people who feel that openly sharing their concerns or feelings is a personal violation and profoundly embarrassing. Others look to conflict as an opportunity to unburden themselves and value directness and transparency in their communication.

Relational Versus Substantive

A relational style focuses on building, repairing, or maintaining a relationship, whereas a substantive style is oriented toward addressing the issues in dispute. Sometimes these differences of style are manifested in the amount of time that each person wishes to devote to visiting, getting to know one another, or informally interacting before turning to a discussion of difficult issues (see Moore and Woodrow, 2010).

Submissive Versus Dominant

Submissive and dominant behaviors have less to do with whether people get their needs met than with the roles these individuals play in a conflict. At one end of this continuum are those who are always content to let others take the lead in a conflict interaction, even when they are in extreme disagreement with them. At the

other end are those who must be the driving force of the process. Sometimes the submissive style is actually the most powerful in controlling the course and outcome of a conflict—meekness and humility can be a morally effective strategy and can induce others to work very hard to obtain the submissive disputants' agreement.

Threatening Versus Conciliatory

Some people try to get their way by intimidating others, threatening consequences, and using whatever sources of coercive power they have. Others try to placate, repair relationships, and avoid the direct application of coercive power at all costs.

For a behavior, emotional stance, or cognitive method to be an individual's conflict style, it has to be a characteristic approach, preference, or marked tendency for that person and not simply a product of the particular circumstances. That does not mean that circumstances do not elicit certain styles or approaches, however. We may observe individuals who seem to vary their styles to fit the circumstances to the point where we wonder whether they have any continuity of style at all. Often they have more consistency than we may initially observe, but it is a consistency that can be understood only in context. For example, I have worked with people who appear to be calm, submissive, and even meek when there is no pressure to make an immediate decision. But when circumstances require a decision, they become emotional, dominating, and demanding. They do have a consistency of style, but understanding it requires attention to different contexts.

The stylistic variables I have outlined here are not independent of one another. They are also not by any means an exhaustive inventory of styles, but they are significant descriptors of the different tendencies people exhibit in handling conflict.

In considering conflict styles, conflict interveners confront two further important questions. First, do groups, organizations, communities, and societies have conflict styles? For example, does the United States have a conflict style? Does the United Auto Workers? Google? New York City? A particular class in a school? Your family? As parties to conflict these entities do exhibit styles of conflicting, but this does not mean that all the individuals who make up each

entity themselves share these approaches. Although the descriptions of the variables given here might have to be slightly altered to apply to groups or organizations, the variables themselves are very relevant. As a general rule, the larger a group, the harder it is to identify a style without stereotyping or making unsupportable generalizations. But that does not mean we cannot find some predominant characteristics or themes in how any particular group, organization, community, or system handles conflict. Just consider the differences you might expect to encounter in how conflict is dealt with in New York City versus in Omaha, Nebraska. In New York, direct confrontation about differences is more normative, and "politeness" is a less encompassing interactional value than it is in Omaha.

The second question is more complicated. Are there good and bad conflict styles? An extreme or rigid approach in any style may be harmful to the individuals or groups exhibiting it and to those with whom they interact. But I believe it is less productive to think about whether conflict styles are good or bad than to consider whether they are effective or nonproductive in any given circumstance. Extremes of style aside, most of these approaches have been effective at different times. The most important question here is how adaptable and flexible people can be in the style they bring to any given conflict. When people can alter their style to adapt to a particular situation, they are likely to be more effective than when their approach is extremely limited.