

CHAPTER 8

Managing Interpersonal Conflict

*To know when to go away and when to come closer
is the key to any lasting relationship.*

—Doménico Cieri Estrada
Mexican author

Chapter 8 explores issues of harmony and discord in interpersonal relationships. The chapter addresses the key components in relationship communication and some of the communication problems that can arise in a relationship. The chapter differentiates between emotions and feelings and discusses ways of developing emotional awareness and empathic communication. Strategies for expressing feelings constructively and using emotional intelligences are also provided, and the chapter concludes with a discussion of interpersonal conflict and suggestions for ways to reduce or resolve that conflict.

Relationships do not always develop smoothly or remain trouble free. Often, tension, misunderstandings, disagreements, or conflict disrupt the harmony of a relationship. If these problems are not addressed, they can stay beneath the surface and cause tension or even create permanent damage to the relationship. When should you seek to address such problems and how do you do so? These subjects are the topic of this chapter.

Communication in Relationships

When you first form any kind of relationship with another person, the relationship tends to be harmonious. Both people are usually cautious about what they tell each other and how they say it, and they make a conscious effort to present positive information about themselves and to avoid conflict. Researchers have found that one of the reasons a new relationship is usually so pleasant and friendly is that people emphasize the similarities they have and ignore the differences (Brown & Rogers, 1991).

As a relationship progresses, however, the differences between people emerge. When these differences are small or judged to be insignificant by both parties,

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they can be ignored. Insignificant issues are still worth discussing, however. A person who squeezes the toothpaste in the middle of the tube, when you prefer it be squeezed from the bottom, can be extremely annoying. Leaving the milk out on the counter to sour instead of putting it back in the refrigerator can be financially wasteful as well as maddening to others.

Unless the differences between the people are numerous, however, issues that can be easily changed, such as those related to daily routines or habits, can often be discussed and resolved easily without threatening the continuation of the relationship. It can be harmful, especially in romantic relationships, to ignore differences in major issues such as personal and moral values (concepts of right and wrong), lifestyle preferences, financial matters, religious beliefs, sexual preferences, and the raising of children. Issues such as these can be serious stumbling blocks to harmonious personal relationships. Later in this chapter, we will explore other strategies that can be employed to work through serious differences. Counseling may be advisable, however, to resolve some of these issues.

Key Components of Communication

Adaptation

Earlier chapters discussed the fact that our "self" is flexible and that we adapt so that our behavior is appropriate to a particular situation. For example, at work, you might "tone down" your loud voice and outgoing personality to fit a more serious environment or use more formal language to talk with the boss than when conversing with a close friend.

Every relationship is different, and in each relationship you usually construct an initial identity that is compatible with the other person, rather than revealing your "true self." As the relationship develops, however, you adapt that image to reflect more accurately who you are, and your communication adapts as well. Your disclosures to other people and their disclosures to you enable you to build trust and confidence in the connection with this other person.

Self-Disclosure

Social penetration theory, which was discussed in Chapter 7, suggests that over time a relationship progresses from safe and superficial to more personal disclosures. Your disclosures to the other person become broader (including more areas

of your life) and deeper (involving more intimate and personally meaningful topics). The most important characteristic of a deep interpersonal relationship is the self-disclosure of our innermost thoughts and feelings (Roeckelein, 1998).

Thus, as a relationship progresses, your constructed self gives way to more open disclosures of your true identity. In a deep, intimate relationship with someone, you have risked a great deal and have shared your deepest thoughts, feelings, fears, and flaws with the other person. Disclosure is generally reciprocal, so the other person has risked a great deal as well. These mutual disclosures have increased your vulnerability to being hurt or taken advantage of by the other person, and the fact that you have invested so much of yourself may make it difficult to disrupt or to end the relationship.



Relationships are usually harmonious in the beginning because people emphasize similarities and ignore differences.

Rewards and Costs

The word *discord* can be defined as the friction, disagreement, or conflict that occurs between people or in situations. The word comes from the Latin prefix *dis-* meaning “apart” and the root word *cors* meaning “heart” (Encarta, 2009). Thus, whenever discord occurs, we might say that the hearts of the individuals are far apart. When discord enters a relationship, you tend to weigh the reward of trying to fix the problem against the costs in time and effort associated with working through the issue. At times, you might also weigh staying in the relationship against the costs of ending it. Thibaut and Kelly (1959) use the following formula to illustrate how we make these evaluations:

$$\text{Outcomes} = \text{Rewards} - \text{Costs}$$

The formula can be interpreted in this way: People want to maximize their rewards and minimize their costs in relationships. The outcome of the relationship depends on the balance between these two factors. If the costs are greater than the rewards, most people will attempt to resolve the issues or to end the relationship. For example, when the costs of remaining friends with someone outweigh the rewards of that friendship, a person will generally break off the relationship.

On the other hand, if the rewards are greater than the costs, the person will generally continue the relationship. For example, many people find becoming a parent joyful and satisfying (the rewards) but also tiring and frustrating (the costs). However, most parents feel the rewards are greater than the costs and continue developing relationships with their children (Shafer, 1999).

Barriers to Effective Communication

The process of building a relationship with someone is not always smooth and trouble-free. Communication problems can arise that disrupt the relationship or even cause its termination. Three common communication problems in relationships stem from the following behaviors of one or both parties: (1) silence or refusing to communicate; (2) **placating**, which means to soothe or calm someone by being nice or by giving in to demands; and (3) playing games. These behaviors can sabotage a relationship and stand in the way of honest, open communication. Let us examine these behaviors and some ways to get past these obstacles to a strong relationship.

Silence

We are all quiet or silent at times, but prolonged silence can be harmful in interpersonal relationships. One marriage therapist reports that people most commonly resort to silence when they are angry and/or hurt, when they are unable to communicate their feelings, or when they want to punish their partner (Slupesky, 2010). When one or both parties in a relationship withdraws and refuses to communicate for a lengthy period of time, however, tension increases, problems remain unresolved, resentments build, and frustration, anger, and increased distance between the parties often result. If the silence is prolonged, the parties in the relationship may drift apart or seek other people to provide them with emotional support.

Refusing to talk with someone is frequently a means of controlling the other person or exerting power in a relationship. If it is prolonged, it can even be a form of psychological abuse (Chang, 1996). When a person is ignored, ostracized or excluded from a group, or treated as though he or she did not exist, the results can be psychologically and emotionally devastating.

Interpersonal relationships may be seriously damaged by the silent treatment. Finding a way to break the silence and to engage in a meaningful discussion of issues is crucial to repairing the relationship. Sweeping hurt feelings “under the rug” and pretending that nothing is wrong will not solve the problem. It may take some time to let anger subside; however, when both parties are calm, simply acknowledging the silence can be helpful. Saying something like, “It appears to me that you are upset about something. Can we talk about it?” may begin a useful discussion. If the other party is unwilling to discuss the issue, you might try again after some time has passed or make a statement such as, “I would really like to sit down and talk about what happened whenever you are ready to do so,” and then leave it to the other person to make the first move.

Placating

Placating refers to a variety of strategies to calm another person or to keep from “rocking the boat.” For example, giving in to another person’s demands, being overly nice, letting someone else have his or her way, taking the blame when things go wrong, or going overboard in being caring and cooperative are ways people try to placate others. You may also be a “pleaser” and use placating as a means of trying to make others happy or to like you more.

Although you may consider placating as just being kind to the other person, problems with this type of behavior occur when it is not authentic and you send messages that do not reflect how you feel. Continually placating others can be a disservice to yourself and your own feelings.

Placating can be useful for example, to defuse a volatile situation that could be dangerous if someone became angry or violent. Placating can keep you safe in such a situation, but it is not a long-term strategy for a good relationship because it can mask your feelings and postpone your expression of them. Over time, placating can suffocate your identity and diminish your sense of self-worth (Hamel, 2008).

Modern Communication: Letting It Go to Voice Mail

Have you ever felt like simply being alone? Everybody needs some peace and quiet in their lives. But how often do you actually get that time without distraction? Sometimes, one of the best things that you can do for yourself is to take time to think, reflect, and relax. Occasionally, that will mean that you aren’t just taking advantage of a quiet moment but that you are actively seeking moments of peace and clarity. How can you actively seek this quiet? It may seem countercultural but not every phone call needs to be answered, nor does every email need an immediate response. Indeed, sometimes a great practice is to turn off your phone for a couple hours or to go an entire evening without going online. There are some cautions, though, when actively seeking silence in this manner. While moments of peace are useful and even necessary for a healthy emotional life, not everyone may understand your motivations. Remember, silence itself can send a message, and you don’t want others to get the wrong message. A romantic partner may need notice that you won’t be answering your phone and may need to understand the reasons. A family member who expects immediate responses needs to know not to expect a response for a while so he or she doesn’t worry about your well-being. And keep in mind that silence as a form of punishment is not healthy or effective. While getting closer to other people is a basic human need, sometimes you can best have those interactions after a moment of peace and calm!

reason but unable to put your finger on exactly why you feel that way or to name the feeling. Awareness of your emotional state means being able to clearly express, in words, what you are feeling and why.

Developing an awareness of what you are feeling and the ability to honestly assess those feelings will help you connect with your inner self. Intellect is a valuable quality; however, "gut feelings"—the instinctive response to something—is essential as well. It can help keep you safe by alerting you that something is wrong. It can also help you identify what you sincerely want to do, as when your "heart leads you in a certain direction." One researcher believes that negative feelings are also one of the primary causes of personal pain and suffering (Beauregard, 2003). So learning how to manage emotions and regulate your feelings may help you lead a happier life.

Empathy

If you have access to your feelings and understand them, you can develop the ability to understand and be sensitive to the feelings of others. This sensitivity can bring you closer to people and enable you to feel empathy with them. **Empathy** is defined as putting yourself in another person's shoes or imagining another person's thoughts and feelings. When you feel empathy with another person, you identify with him or her and understand his or her thoughts and feelings; you are able to vicariously experience another's feelings and thoughts.

However, to be empathetic, you must have had the same or similar thoughts and feelings. When someone shares his or her feelings with you, try to recall experiences you have had that have generated similar feelings for you. Your identification of that same feeling in yourself can help you understand others.

For example, suppose someone tells you that he or she is terrified of flying in an airplane. If you love to fly, you may have a difficult time understanding why someone feels fear on a plane. Think of an experience that terrified you—for example, when you saw a rattlesnake in front of you while walking on a trail. Think about the fear you had then, and you will be able to understand the feeling the other person experiences in the airplane. One of the primary benefits of people in a relationship sharing their thoughts and feelings with each other is to help each other understand the emotions of the other person.

In much the same way that perception gives information about objects and other stimuli in the outside world, 19th-century philosopher Theodor Lipps (1903) believed that empathy serves as our primary source of information about other people (Lipps, 1903/1979). In a sense, empathy allows you to read the minds of other people because it enables you to understand their mental states.

Expressing Feelings Constructively

Expressing your feelings with another person in a helpful or constructive way is more effective than being judgmental and blaming. This latter type of communication will not deepen the understanding and communication between the two of you and can cause conflict. To be constructive when expressing feelings, it is better to deal with emotions one at a time and to express feelings as they arise, rather than to store them for later. (However, in some instances you may need a little time to identify the emotion that precipitated the feeling; at other times, the social situation in which the emotion arises would make your expression of it inappropriate.) The following sections offer some ideas to keep in mind about when and how to express feelings in a constructive manner.

Emotions as Information about Feelings

Emotions can be very beneficial in providing information about your feelings. For example, when you have negative feelings, you know that something is wrong. The emotions associated with feelings such as anger, remorse, disgust, sadness, and fear are all directed toward someone or something; understanding this fact can help to focus your thoughts and direct your actions toward finding out the cause of your feelings or taking some corrective action, if necessary. When other people share their feelings with you, it means that they have experienced something in the environment that has generated a feeling for them. If you judge the other person by saying, "You are just being a pessimist," or "You have no right to feel that way," you only increase the distance between the two of you. Instead, simply consider the other person's statement of feelings as information you can use to analyze the situation. Could something you said or did possibly be misinterpreted by the other person? Did something in the other person's past create the potential for him or her to interpret the situation in this particular way? Knowing how emotions become thoughts and then feelings and then behavior can allow you to analyze the situation to see how you can improve it.

Appropriate Time and Place

Once you identify your feelings, you must figure out the appropriate time and place to express them. Sometimes this is immediately. Maybe you are at a sports-watching party and your team has just won—expressing your feelings of joy right at the moment would be appropriate. However, just because you feel something does not mean that you must express it immediately, especially if the situation in which you experience the emotion is not the appropriate time for you to address it with the other person. For example, you might be angry at remarks your significant other made at a party, but to avoid making a scene, you would probably want to wait until you were at home to discuss just how angry you were. When you put feelings on hold in a situation like this, you should take the earliest appropriate opportunity to discuss the issue with the other person and to air these feelings.

"I" Statements

An important key to constructively handling feelings is to take responsibility for them—to own them. We are each responsible for our own feelings—through our thoughts, we created these feelings. No one can make you feel anything; your feelings are your own. So, instead of accusing someone of causing your feeling by saying, "You make me angry," it is more accurate and more responsible to say, "I feel angry." When speaking of feelings, send "I" messages to show that you take responsibility for your feelings. You can mention what the other person is doing that is causing you to feel anger; however, it is important to simply describe the behavior and not judge it. For example, when talking to a significant other, you might say, "Because you are not looking at me when I am talking to you, I feel that you are not interested in what I have to say." This statement describes both how you feel and describes the other person's behavior without attacking him or her. This approach is much more constructive than using a "you" message such as saying, "You are rude for not looking at me when I am speaking, and that's why I am angry." "You are rude" judges the behavior and then blames the other person for your feeling with the statement, "that's why I am angry."

Emotional Intelligence

Your capacity to understand, communicate, and manage emotions and feelings, as well as your ability to understand and respond to the feelings of others, indicate

your level of **emotional intelligence (EI)**. EI involves making good judgments about when to deal with emotions and when to put them on hold.

Emotional intelligence also directly corresponds to emotional health—the higher your EI, the more emotionally healthy you are. Good emotional health enables you to be secure in your feelings, which means that you are less likely to be thrown off balance by your interactions with other people. Emotional health allows you to stay in touch with your own feelings while you are exposed to the feelings of others. It also enables you to handle life's emotional setbacks in a healthy manner instead of taking out your feelings on others (Segal, 1997). Emotional intelligence has three components: (1) the ability to effectively perceive, communicate, and manage negative emotions; (2) the ability to experience, communicate, and sustain positive emotions; and (3) the ability to retain perspective during difficult times and to recover following stressful events (Zautra, 2003). We all have unique strengths and weaknesses in our EI, in different areas. Research has shown that your personality has an effect on how often you experience positive and negative emotions (Zautra, 2003). Do you look at a glass of water as half full or half empty?

Letting Go of Negative Thoughts

Every positive and negative feeling you have is a direct result of your thoughts and your interpretation of circumstances. You can change these feelings by changing your thoughts and interpretations. For example, imagine you had a job in interview for a position you wanted very badly and thought you were well qualified for. You thought the interview went well, and you were in a positive mood. You spent a considerable time writing an email thank-you note to the interviewer to express your feelings and appreciation for the interview. After reading it a dozen times and spell-checking it at least three times, you clicked "Send." Then you went to your Sent file to make sure the message was there and found a typo in the last line of the message.

What do you say to yourself about this mistake? Do you beat up on yourself for your error and tell yourself that you will definitely not get the job because of your mistake, or do you let it go and tell yourself that one mistake in an informal email will not override the knowledge and experience you demonstrated on your résumé and in the interview?

It is not the circumstance (the error) that affects you; it is what you think about that circumstance and, more important, the way you translate your thoughts into feelings that creates the effect on you. The circumstance itself is neutral. You have no way of knowing how the reader will react to the error (or if he or she will even notice it). Only your thought brings meaning to that circumstance (Carlson, 1997). This means that if you are a pessimist and tend to focus on the negative aspects of a circumstance, you can counter this tendency; you can refuse to dwell on the negative and not allow yourself to think negative thoughts about the email error or its consequences.

Thoughts come very quickly, however, and it takes a great deal of practice to anticipate negative thoughts and to catch them before you think them. For example, when you spotted the spelling error, you may have immediately thought: "Oh, no; I can't believe I made such a stupid mistake; it will probably cost me the job." So the thought is there, but you can dismiss it; you do not have to translate it into a negative feeling. A thought is not reality; it is only a thought. You do not have to translate it into a negative feeling that upsets you. After you think this thought, you might instead say to yourself, "That thought is not reality; it is only a thought. I will not allow it to bring me down and ruin my positive mood."

Psychotherapist and author Richard Carlson (1997) suggests that you think of negative thoughts similar to the way you think about your dreams. You may

awaken and be upset about something that occurred in a dream. But you understand that dreaming is merely thinking while you are asleep, and you dismiss the negative dream because you realize that it is not reality. The negative thoughts you have while awake also seem real, but they are not necessarily the truth. You can dismiss them like bad dreams and not allow them to spiral out of control until they ruin an entire day or even a lifetime. When negative thoughts assail you, Carlson suggests you remind yourself of the following: "We all produce a steady stream of thoughts, twenty-four hours a day. . . . Pick and choose which thoughts you wish to react to" (p. 11).

Understanding Moods

It may seem as though your level of happiness goes up and down with circumstances. We often refer to these variations in happiness as **moods**, and characterize them as high or low or as good moods or bad moods. Moods are simply a part of being human, and learning to deal with them effectively instead of letting them control how you feel will help you manage conflict.

When you are in a good mood, all looks right with the world. You are thinking positive thoughts, you feel good, and life is great. However, a bad mood can sour your entire day—and your interactions with people. When you are in a bad mood, you tend to think negative thoughts and to react negatively to situations. This tendency can cause problems in your relationships.

For example, your significant other may suggest watching a particular movie some evening that you do not think you will enjoy. If your mood is good, you might decide to give the movie a chance and agree to watch it. On the other hand, if you are in a bad mood, you might respond with "No, I know I won't like that movie." Your thoughts about the movie, your verbal statement, your tone of voice, and your body language all send negative messages to the other person.

Moods change over time. Like most people, you have probably had the experience of encountering a problem that looks serious one day but looks much better after a good night's sleep. If you are aware that you or the person with whom you are communicating is in a bad mood, the best way to handle it is often to not take the mood too seriously and wait for it to pass. An alternative is to communicate your mood to the other person. For example, if you are in a low mood, in response to your partner's invitation to watch a movie you might respond, "I would be willing to watch the movie with you some other evening, but tonight I am in a bit of a funk."

By being aware of moods, you will recognize that situations look different to people in different moods, you will have more compassion for yourself and for other people. You will be less likely to judge others as always pessimistic or negative. Such judgments are often the beginning of an argument between people. In fact, Carlson believes, "Most serious relationship problems turn out to be nothing more than two partners who have made a habit of taking each other's low moods too seriously" (1997, p. 32–33).

Handling Conflict

You will most likely encounter conflict frequently in your personal life and on the job. Being able to identify conflict and deal with it will improve your relationships. Conflict goes beyond simply disagreeing on how to accomplish a task or deciding between two alternative courses of action. Conflict is personal, and it might be defined as "angry disagreement." When conflict erupts, emotions are involved, and the relationship can be threatened if the conflict is not resolved amicably.

How do you know when you are dealing with a conflict? Daniel Dana, a pioneer in the field of mediation, suggests that four factors must be present for a disagreement to be considered a conflict:

- Two people are interdependent; they each need something from the other.
- Both parties blame the other or find fault with them for causing the problem.
- One or more of the parties is angry or emotionally upset.
- The parties' behaviors are affecting their relationship with each other and/or their relationships with others (Dana, 2000).

Let us look at these four criteria in an imaginary situation. Suppose that you have been assigned a class project that requires you to perform some complicated mathematical calculations and write a paper. You are confident of your ability to write the paper; however, your math skills are poor. You ask your sister for help with the math problems during the coming week. In return, you offer to let her borrow your car for the week while hers is in the shop for repairs. Your sister agrees to the arrangement, and you give her your car keys the following day. During the coming week, you ask her twice to help you with the math problems; each time she tells you that she is busy. Tomorrow is the deadline for the project to be submitted, and your sister says she does not have time today to help you with the math. The two of you begin to argue, and you accuse her of taking advantage of you by using your car all week and not helping you as she promised. You ask that she return your car keys immediately. Your sister becomes upset with you and claims that her schedule is busy and you just kept asking for her help at inconvenient times.

This example exhibits all four factors of a conflict: You and your sister need something from each other, you blame each other for the problem, you are both angry at the other, and the situation has the potential to cause long-term damage to the relationship between the two of you. Conflicts such as the one in this hypothetical situation can quickly **escalate**, or increase and worsen, and lead to name calling, angry outbursts, or even physical violence. Conflict can permanently damage a relationship if it is not successfully resolved. It can ruin marriages, separate friends, and shatter families. It can also be painful and damaging to other people. If the conflict occurs in a family, for example, it can affect children or other family members and affect their relationships with one another as well as with parties involved in the conflict. Your skill in resolving conflict can help you preserve these important relationships.

Constructive and Destructive Conflict

In all relationships, whether they are romantic partnerships, family relationships, or friendships, conflict is inevitable. We form relationships in part because we seek many types of fulfillment from our partnerships. We might look for pleasure, joy, intimacy, safety and security, nurturing, companionship, and other positive benefits from others. We have to not only satisfy our own needs but also satisfy the needs of the other person at the same time. If these mutual needs are not compatible, conflict can result. While conflict can be destructive, it can also be positive and provide several benefits in a relationship.

The Benefits of Conflict

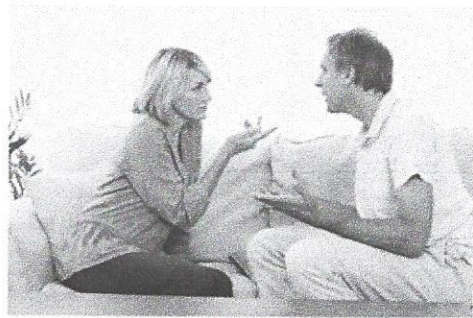
Conflict can be dangerous because it has a tendency to grow and worsen, but it can also have important benefits that can strengthen a relationship and might

Positive Emotions during Conflict

Researchers have found that serious relationship problems arise when those in the relationship are unable to reach beyond the immediate conflict and include positive as well as negative emotions in their discussions. In a landmark study of newlywed couples, for example, researchers attempted to predict who would have a happy marriage versus an unhappy marriage or a divorce, based on the ways in which the newlyweds communicated with each other. Specifically, they created a stressful conflict situation for the couples and then evaluated how many times the newlyweds expressed positive emotions and how many times they expressed negative emotions in talking with each other about the situation.

When the marital status and happiness of each couple were evaluated over the next six years, the study found that the strongest predictor of a marriage that stayed together and was happy was the degree of positive emotions expressed during the conflict situation in the initial interview (Gottman, Coan, Carrere, & Swanson, 1998).

In happy marriages, instead of always responding to anger with anger, the couples found a way to lighten the tension and to de-escalate the conflict. In long-lasting marriages, during stressful times or in the middle of conflict, couples were able to interject some positive comments and positive regard for each other. When this finding is generalized to other types of interpersonal relationships, it makes a strong case for having some positive interactions, interjecting some humor, some light-hearted fun, or some playfulness into your conversation while you are trying to resolve conflicts.



The strongest predictor of a happy marriage that lasted was the degree of positive emotions expressed during conflict.

Resolving Conflict

The way in which each person deals with conflict varies based on experience, personality, and communication style. Often we do not know how we will deal with a particular circumstance until it occurs. However, the following basic information about what may be helpful and not helpful can help you make wise choices about how to handle conflict.

Communication Styles

One of the most important components of conflict resolution is personal communication style. Four basic communication styles have been identified that range from submissive or nonconfrontational to aggressive and forceful. These four styles are illustrated in Figure 8.2. See if you can identify your communication style, in most situations, from this figure and from the following descriptions of each style.

Passive Communication Style

A **passive communication style** is one in which a person tends to give in to the demands of other people and accepts being “put upon” by others. People who use this communication style try to avoid conflict or to withdraw from it. They tend to speak softly and are often reluctant to express opinions. They may be apologetic, shy, or introverted, and they may be seen by others as easily manipulated. Those with passive communication styles often look down and make little eye contact.

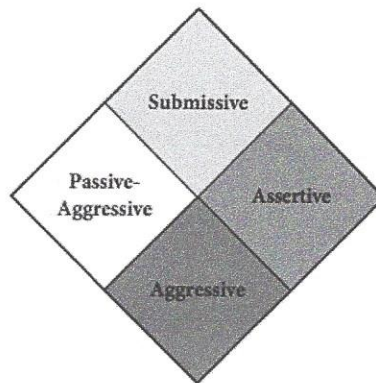


Figure 8.2 Four Basic Communication Styles

Their body posture is often closed, with their arms drawn inward, and they use few gestures to punctuate their speech (Hartley, 1999).

Assertive Communication Style

Those with an **assertive communication style** communicate clearly, openly, firmly, and fluently in conversations. They tend to make eye contact with others, use appropriate facial expressions, and have a relaxed but upright body posture. They are not afraid to be spontaneous, and they use nonverbal communication freely to support their verbal statements. Research indicates that assertive individuals inspire confidence in others and will tend to feel more in control of their lives, derive more satisfaction from relationships, and achieve their goals more often than nonassertive individuals (Hartley, 1999).

An assertive communication style is well balanced. It is neither forceful nor passive. Assertive communicators express their ideas and voice their concerns, and they do so in a moderate volume, pitch, and conversational rate of speech. They are candid without being confrontational, and they are expressive. If confronted by an aggressive communicator, assertive communicators refrain from lashing back and respond reasonably (Arredondo, 2000).

Aggressive Communication Style

People who use an **aggressive communication style** tend to dominate conversations. They typically speak at a high or low pitch, and their tone of voice can be demanding. They are forceful or "in your face" in their communication and can be intimidating to others (Arredondo, 2000). Their goal is winning, and they may interrupt, talk loudly, stare at others, or even be abusive in their communication. They also run the risk of inviting an even more aggressive response to their statements, which can result in escalating disagreements and conflicts (Hartley, 1999).

Passive-Aggressive Communication Style

A **passive-aggressive communication style** is a hybrid of a passive style and an aggressive style of communication. On the surface, there is no visible aggression. However, the passive-aggressive communicator expresses anger, resentment, or

negative feelings indirectly or attempts to sabotage situations. Passive-aggressive behavior may include being stubborn or procrastinating instead of doing something that someone requested. Rather than confronting or opposing someone directly, a passive-aggressive strategy might be to manipulate others or hinder their progress in some way.

Using an Assertive Communication Style

Learning to use an assertive communication style allows you to openly and honestly express your feelings and is generally the most constructive way to deal with conflict. The following sections discuss six approaches to assertive behavior that you can use to resolve conflicts. Generally, you will want to begin by using a low-level assertion. If this style is not successful, then you should try a higher-level assertion until the conflict is successfully resolved. The six approaches are described from the lowest to the highest level of assertiveness (Back & Back, 1991).

Basic Assertion

A basic assertion is the lowest level of assertion and the starting point for communication problem solving. With a basic assertion, you simply make a straightforward statement of what you need, want, believe, or feel. For example, you might say to a friend, "I need to study for an exam, so I will not be able to go out to dinner with you tonight."

Responsive Assertion

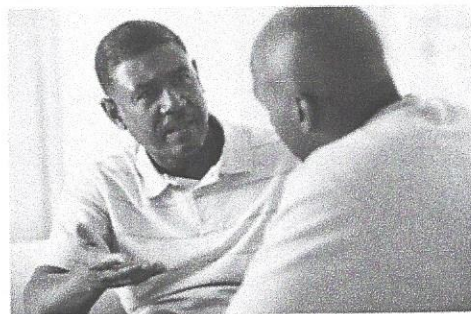
With a responsive assertion, you check the other person's needs or feelings before stating your own. For example, you might say to a friend, "Were you still interested in going out to dinner? I just found out that I need to study for an exam tonight." In this example, if the other person was really counting on having dinner with you, perhaps you can work out a compromise so you can have a light dinner and then study. Or, you may be able to negotiate moving the dinner to tomorrow night instead.

Empathetic Assertion

With an empathetic assertion, you state your own needs and wants but also recognize that the other person has needs or feelings as well. For example, you might say to your friend, "I just learned that I have an exam due tomorrow, and I have to study tonight. I know this is late notice, and I hate to disappoint you if you were counting on dinner together. Is there any way we can revise our plans that will work for you?" At this point, you might bargain to make it up to the other person in some way such as letting him or her pick the time and location of the dinner.

Assertion with Consequences

This is a strong form of assertion in which you tell the other person what will happen if he or she does not change behavior. The assertion is not phrased as a threat and offers the other person the chance to change before there are any consequences. An example of a way to use this type of assertion appropriately



Assertive communication sends a clear, firm, and well-balanced message.

in the dinner example would be to say, "I'm sorry about this last-minute change in plans. I hope we can find another day this week that will work for you. If not, I'm afraid that I will just have to cancel."

Discrepancy Assertion

With this type of assertion, you point out the discrepancy between what you have previously agreed on and what is happening or is about to happen. This usually means repeating what you want in the situation. Let us use a different example here—one that you might encounter with a co-worker. "Last Tuesday you said you would give me the results of the employee survey before the end of the week. You have not given me those results yet, and I would like to review them this week."

Negative Feelings Assertion

This type of assertion points out the effect that the other person's behavior has on you and usually contains four components: (1) a description of how the other person has behaved (expressed as objectively and as descriptively as you can), (2) a statement of how the other person's behavior affects you, (3) a description of how you feel, and (4) a description of what you want or would prefer (Hartley, 1999). For example, using these four components in the same order: "When you do not give me material when you promised it, I end up having to juggle my workload. I get frustrated when this happens, so I would appreciate it if you would deliver the materials when you say you will."

Even though the goal of assertiveness is to diffuse a conflict, it does not always work. For conflict to be averted or resolved, the other person in the communication must be willing to resolve the conflict as well and must read your communication attempt properly. However, using an assertive communication style will give you the best chance to resolve an issue without escalating the conflict.

Improving Skills for Managing Conflict

It is important to remember that conflict is natural and bound to occur in any relationship. Instead of avoiding conflict, it is most productive to resolve differences as rapidly and constructively as possible. Using the techniques for assertive communication outlined in this chapter will help you accomplish this goal.

Because research has shown that positive emotions are important to conflict resolution, injecting some humor into a conflict situation, reminding the other person how much you care for him or her, teasing each other, or making a nonverbal show of affection for the other person such as hugging him or her are also methods you might use to de-escalate conflict and to resolve problems. Your knowledge of the other person and how he or she might react to such displays should govern whether you use any of these methods. Remembering the positive things about your relationship when you are in conflict can often allow you to work out differences and have a mutually satisfying resolution that preserves a happy relationship.

You can also often prevent conflict by using the other interpersonal communication skills discussed in this text and increasing your awareness of your own communication behaviors. Are you unconsciously creating potential conflict situations through your use of threatening language? Is your nonverbal behavior at times domineering or overbearing? Do you get overly emotional during conflict situations?

Paying attention and modifying your behavior, checking your perceptions with other people, practicing effective listening skills, and using the skills of emotional intelligence can all be useful means of preventing or diminishing conflict. Also,

resist the temptation to judge others when they do not communicate as well as you would like and try to be tolerant and accepting of the behavior of others when they explain things in more detail than you need, they talk too slowly, or they ramble.

Finally, recognize that you may not be able to resolve all conflicts with communication. Because conflict can escalate, it can lead to aggressive and violent behavior that can become dangerous and harmful to your safety and security. When conflict becomes destructive or physically, verbally, or emotionally abusive, removing yourself from the situation may be the best way to handle the issue.

Summary

When you first establish a relationship, it is usually harmonious because both parties make an effort to present positive information about themselves and to avoid conflict. As the relationship progresses, differences between those involved in the relationship emerge. Small, insignificant issues can be overlooked, but it is harmful to ignore major issues such as differences in personal and moral values, lifestyle preferences, financial matters, religious beliefs, sexual preferences, and the raising of children. In relationships, you usually try to create a positive first impression and "put your best foot forward" rather than reveal your "true self." As relationships progress, you and the other person make reciprocal disclosures. These disclosures increase your vulnerability to being hurt or taken advantage of, and the fact that you have invested a great deal of yourself may make it difficult for you to disrupt or to end the relationship. You also want to maximize your rewards and minimize your costs in relationships, so you weigh the rewards against the costs to determine if you should continue the relationship or end it.

The most common problems in relationships stem from silence or refusing to communicate, placating the other person, and playing games. These behaviors can sabotage a relationship and prevent honest, open communication.

Whenever problems occur in a relationship, emotions and feelings are usually involved. Emotions are the reactions your body has to certain stimuli. Feelings arise when you add thought and interpretation to these physical reactions. By becoming aware of the thoughts and interpretations you give to your emotions and the feelings they produce in you, you have the potential to improve your life. Getting in touch with your emotions and feelings also allows you to develop the ability to understand and feel empathy for other people.

Your goal in expressing emotions with others should be to share your feelings in a way that is helpful or constructive rather than one that is judgmental and blaming. You can do this by thinking of emotions as information that helps you analyze yourself and your relationships; by putting feelings on hold, but not storing them; and by owning your feelings. Your emotional intelligence is a measure of how well you handle emotional issues.

Conflict can be defined as angry disagreement or disagreement that has a personal and emotional component. For conflict to be present, people must be interdependent, both parties blame or find fault with the other for causing the problem, one or more of the parties is angry or emotionally upset, and their behavior must affect the relationship or relationships with others. Unresolved conflict can permanently damage a relationship. In happy marriages, for example, researchers found that couples found a way to lighten the tension and to de-escalate the conflict.

The ways in which each person deals with conflict varies based on experiences, personality, and communication style. Using an assertive communication style allows you to openly and honestly express your feelings and is generally the most constructive way to deal with conflict.