Effective Listening Guides

1. Stop talking!
You cannot listen if you are talking
Polonius (Hamlet): "Give every man thine ear, but few thy voice".

2. Put the talker at ease.
Help a person feel free to talk.
This is often called a permissive environment.

3. Show a talker that you want to listen.
Look and act interested. Do not read your mail while someone talks.
Listen to understand rather than to oppose.

4. Remove distractions.
Don't doodle, tap, or shuffle papers.
Will it be quieter if you shut the door?

5. Empathize with talkers.
Try to help yourself see the other person's point of view.

6. Be patient.
Allow plenty of time. Do not interrupt a talker.
Don't start for the door or walk away.

7. Hold your temper.
An angry person takes the wrong meaning from words.

8. Go easy on argument and criticism.
This puts people on the defensive, and they may "clam up" or become angry.
Do not argue. Even if you win, you lose.

9. Ask questions.
This encourages a talker and shows that you are listening.
It helps to develop points further

10. Stop talking
This is first and last, because all other guides depend on it.
You cannot do an effective listening job while you are talking.

* Nature gave people two ears but only one tongue, which is a gentle hint that they should listen more than they talk.
* Listening requires two ears, one for meaning and one for feeling.
* Decision makers who do not listen have less information for making sound decisions.

Source: Keith Davis, Human Relations at Work, 5th ed. (New York McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1978), p. 387.

Empathy

The discovery of the other through the eyes of the other

"What I see depends on where I'm at."
Einstein

- In a negotiation multiple vantage points can help enhance potential outcomes

- To learn better about other parties' vantage points, try to put yourself in their shoes and try to imagine and understand their personal set of needs, hopes, dreams, fears, fantasies underlying their stated positions on the table

- Understanding others' vantage point does not mean agreeing with their stated positions. Empathy must not be mistaken with sympathy, pity, or agreement

- In conflict resolution one of the basic concepts to acknowledge is that ***Our*** truth is ***partial***

- Own the limits of your truth and request the same courtesy of others

- Propose pooling many perspectives to get closer to a larger more vital expression of truth. The truth that enables conflict identification and resolution.

Avoiding Conflicts When You Can

Methods that could be used to reduce unnecessary conflicts and to reduce the ballooning of unnecessary conflicts, might include:

a. Be honest with oneself.

b. Recognize and accept differences in values, perceptions, expectations, gender, race.

c. Redefine expectations and roles on a regular basis.

d. Take time to get to know others with whom you interact frequently so you really know their beliefs, values, and attitudes.

e. Don't automatically assume you are right and they are wrong. Check out assumptions.

f. Review the structures and decision-making methods being used. Modify any that would enhance better relations.

g. Review the organization's "climate", i.e. procedural, psychological and substantial factors.

h. Assess the uses of power; select positive types.

i. Don't feel rejected personally if others disagree with your ideas.

j. Learn and practice attentive listening skills.

k. Provide a method for individuals to ventilate their pent-up feelings.

l. Commit yourselves to seeing that everyone will participate in reviewing what was learned form each conflict and apply this to any future conflicts.

8

A Communication Perspective on Conflict Behavior

Objectives

At the end of this chapter, you should be able to

1. describe the difference between the linear view of communication and the transactional view of communication.
2. articulate the rules that people are using to bring a conflict to resolution.
3. explain how dialectical tensions concerning competence have affected a conflict you experienced in the past.
4. identify the goals and issues in a particular conflict.

Key Terms

appropriateness
communication competence
definitional rules
dialectical tension
effectiveness
evidence
fidelity
goal
identity goal
instrumental goal
issue
linear model
regulative rules
relational goal
rule
transactional model

In the previous chapter, we examined social-psychological views of the conflict situation. These views have in common the idea that the people involved in the conflict, the way in which they relate to one another, and the structure of the situation are the driving forces behind conflict situations. The communication theories of conflict presented in this chapter assume not only that the people involved in the conflict, and their relationship to one another, create conflict situations, but that people create conflict situations through their

communication or message behavior. From this perspective, *communication is viewed as both the cause and the effect of conflict situations.* This perspective arises from three assumptions about the role of communication in conflict:

1. "It is through communicative action that persons initiate, define, maintain, and terminate their social bonds."[1]
2. Much of our interpersonal communication is conflict related in that it is intended to prevent conflicts from occurring, may be used to manage or resolve them when they do occur, and is employed to repair relationships after experiencing a conflict.
3. It can provide people with the proper knowledge, attitudes, and skills for constructive conflict management and resolution.

To take a communication perspective on conflict, one must realize that communication ranges from extremely positive forms of interaction (e.g., lovemaking, gift giving, expressions of affection) to extremely negative (e.g., intimidation, harassment, threats, verbal abuse, conflict, and fighting). This statement may come as a surprise to someone who sees communication solely as a positive, constructive activity. Another way to put this is to say that conflict, despite the potential for growth that it presents to people, often lies on the "dark side" of interpersonal communication.[2]

What is a communication perspective? There are probably as many answers to that question as there are people who would answer it.[3] Typically, the field of communication has embraced a wide variety of perspectives. In this chapter we'll introduce two of those perspectives, and demonstrate how looking at communication in that manner affects the way we define and perceive conflict.

Linear versus Transactional Views of Communication and Conflict

The Linear Model: Message Senders and Receivers

A way in which communication researchers have traditionally viewed communication is to define it as a process of sending and receiving messages. Some communication studies have focused primarily on the sending or encoding of messages and how people in certain situations tend to engage in certain kinds of message production behaviors. These studies raised questions related to goals, purposes, and intentions of message senders. Other communication studies have examined the receiving or decoding of messages and how people are likely to respond to messages. These latter studies raised questions related to the effects of messages on receivers.

Focusing on message senders or message receivers is a way of studying communication. This orientation to communication has been called the **linear model,** because it focuses on the sequential production of messages with either the senders as the starting point or the receivers as the end point. For the most part, it has focused on issues of **fidelity;** that is, is what was "received" the same meaning as what was "sent"? A visual metaphor for the linear model of communication is a conveyor belt that runs back and forth between two people. The sender puts a message on the belt, sends it to the receiver, who then does

something to the message and sends it back to the receiver. Along the way, the message may be sent via one channel or another and may be distorted by external sources, or noise.

Although this approach has helped communication scholars to focus on important issues such as phrasing conflict messages "correctly" (e.g., using "I" language) and listening with empathy to others in the conflict situation, it has largely ignored the fact that conflict is something that people do together. All the empathic listening in the world will probably not bring a conflict to resolution if the other person is determined to yell and scream until the conflict tilts in his or her favor. Similarly, responsible communication is difficult to maintain in the face of one who will not listen. In addition, using a linear model to explain conflict often results in trying to fix the "blame" of the conflict situation on one person or another, not recognizing that both people in a conflict situation contribute to the emergence of the conflict. These kinds of shortcomings have led most in the field of communication to embrace the transactional model of communication.

The Transactional Model: People Communicating Together

Although researchers have commonly referred to senders and receivers of messages in the past, it is more common today to talk about communication as a process by which people make or create meaning together. This is commonly called the **transactional model** of communication. Such an approach recognizes that communication (and by extension, conflict) isn't something we do *to* one another, but something we do *with* one another (like teamwork). A conflict is not seen as something that happens when one person sends a message to another indicating that he or she is unhappy with some behavior performed by the other. That is a traditional view of communication and conflict. Rather conflict is seen as the behaviors of each person, in response to one another, conjointly creating an understanding in which both people perceive themselves as being in conflict with one another. The transactional view emphasizes the process of communicating, whereas the linear view emphasizes the end product of communicating. Some other differences between the linear and transactional views of communication are:

1. The linear view focuses on how an individual's behaviors are followed by another's responses to them, whereas the transactional view emphasizes what people do together. Thus, the transactional view highlights the *inter* in interpersonal communication and conflict: how people collaborate, cooperate, and work together to negotiate and renegotiate an understanding, agreement, or consensus.
2. The linear view treats people as though they have set identities before, during, and after communication or conflict, whereas the transactional view includes the idea that whenever we are in communication with others, we are negotiating and renegotiating who we are—our definitions of ourselves and the impressions we make on others.
3. The linear view also treats relationships as fixed entities that do not change (once friends, always friends; once enemies, always enemies), whereas the transactional view acknowledges that, whenever we are in communication with others, we are negotiating and renegotiating our understanding of our relationship.

The advantage of this latter view is that we begin to recognize the importance of both people's behavior in the conflict situation. One person acting competently in a conflict situation, using good communication skills, usually cannot bring the conflict to some resolution. It takes two people to make the conflict, and it takes two people to manage or resolve it. The way people talk about the conflict together, the way they express messages in response to one another, the way they "read" each other's nonverbal messages as the conflict is being enacted all create the conflict situation as well as manage it or move it to resolution.

In this transactional view of communication and conflict, communication is seen as something that surrounds us. We are not even aware of all the things we do that are communicative in nature. We act within the confines of our culture, our expectations for a particular situation, our expectations for the relationship we are in, and our expectations for our own behavior, and at the same time, we affect our cultural view, our view of the situation, our view of the relationship, and our view of ourselves. The primary difference between the linear and transactional focus in communication may be seen in the visual metaphors we might use to explain each. Whereas the primary visual metaphor for the linear model is a conveyor belt, in the transactional model, communication (and, hence, conflict as a type of communication) is seen more as a dance that two people do together.

APPLICATION 8.1

How can you understand conflict better by explaining it from a linear model or a transactional model? Which one makes more sense to you? Why?

As we examine a communication perspective on conflict, we see that it has the potential to incorporate many of the traditional notions about conflict derived from social-psychological theories, as well as examining meaning-making behavior in conflict situations. Three areas of research take a communication perspective: (1) research that examines communication and conflict as rule-regulated behavior; (2) research that examines the communication competence of those involved in the conflict situation; and (3) research that examines the goals and effects of communication as they relate to the messages that people choose in conflict situations.

Rules and Conflict Communication

> This conflict happened two years ago, when I was still in language school. I had conflicts with several people who were also from Taiwan. They thought I was a snob and didn't want to stay with them. When I had come to the United States, there were several Taiwanese students who had already been here. They usually spent time together and talked together. The reason I spent a lot of money to come here is because I wanted to study in English, in order to make American friends. So, I spent more time with my American friends than with the other students from Taiwan, because I wanted to practice my English. They didn't understand, and spread the rumor that I thought I was too good for them. Eventually, the conflict was gone because they understood my point of view.

Perhaps the easiest kind of conflict to recognize is the kind in which we believe that someone important to us has broken some kind of "rule" about the way people should behave. In the preceding example, the international student was accused of not following the norms for international students—hang around with others like yourself. Stick together.

The student thought it was more important for him to learn English because he had spent so much money in order to come here. When the other students recognized that he was not being standoffish, but only trying to achieve his goals, they were less judgmental about his behavior.

Shiminoff described a communication **rule** as a "followable prescription that indicates what behavior is obligated, preferred, or prohibited in certain contexts."[4] Rules tell us what we must say, what we should say, and what we better not say in different situations. In addition, rules not only tell us what we should and should not do together, but also how we create meaning together.

Rules are of two types, regulative (sometimes called procedural) and definitional (sometimes called constitutive). **Regulative rules** influence our actions or behavioral choices. We generally know that a regulative rule exists largely when we have broken it and face some sort of sanction. For example, at a friend's wedding, it is customary to congratulate the groom and convey best wishes to the bride. Saying "congratulations" to the bride is considered to be in poor taste, and if you do so, you may get a disapproving look from someone. This is a regulative rule, governing what behavior we should choose. The rule is there, but it is not a very strong one—it is a preferred rule. On the other hand, laughing at a funeral is almost unheard of. It is prohibited behavior, and anyone who breaks the rule would probably be escorted out of the room.

We encounter regulative rules when we feel social pressures that encourage us to act one way or another in a given situation. For example, regulative rules tell us that we should indicate we are listening to another person on the telephone by inserting nonverbal phrases like "uh-huh." When we don't do so, the other person may ask if we are still listening. Thus, regulative rules tell us how we should act in particular situations.

On the other hand, **definitional rules** tell us how to interpret what is happening in various situations. In a long-term relationship like a marriage, you may come to understand that when your spouse comes home, enters the house without speaking, and sits in a favorite chair staring off into space, that he or she has had a stressful day and needs some time to calm down. Using particular words within an ongoing relationship may signal a deeper meaning without having to use many words to activate the meaning. For example, one student reported that in his family, they use the word *hernia* to indicate any kind of mistake from one of the members. It's a meaning limited to the family, and simply saying "hernia" is like saying "Gosh, that was dumb. What are you going to do about it?"

We learn rules from experience, through teaching, and when watching others. When we first meet another person, the rules that generally apply to any relationship govern the way we communicate. As the relationship develops, rules become more idiosyncratic, applying to a particular relationship but not to other relationships. For example, when you first met the person whom you currently consider your best friend, you probably talked about things in a pretty general way. There wasn't much difference between the way you spoke with that person and anyone else. As you have come to know each other, though, you know that there are certain things your friend will and will not talk about, and you know the best way to approach any particular topic. You have gone from using general rules to idiosyncratic rules—rules that apply only to this friendship.

The study of rules has important implications for conflict communication. As we observe conflicts, we can see that many of them seem to arise because one person thinks the other has broken some important rule in the relationship. Some of the rules are "common sense" or "common courtesy" rules, as when roommates conflict over cleanliness habits. Rules about keeping the house clean are rarely discussed before a violation occurs. We assume that others know how to clean up after themselves. It is only when we find out differently that we feel a need to discuss the rules. Other rules have been either tacitly or explicitly discussed by people in a close relationship. When you begin to date someone exclusively, for example, you generally agree with the other person that this is what you will do. Accepting a date with another person would violate the rule of exclusivity. Understanding that broken rules may be at the heart of a conflict, however, helps us to recognize what we should do in order to resolve the conflict.

Communication Competence and Conflict Behavior

One way of thinking about how people understand the rules of conflict situations is to examine their behavior as competent or incompetent. People described as competent are often better able to understand both the explicit and implicit rules of relationships, and adjust to expectations accordingly. **Communication competence** "is best conceived as an impression or attribution formed about others. Just as with source credibility, communication competence is attributed to a communicator on the basis of behaviors perceived and judged by others."[5] An extensive study of interpersonal communication competence concluded that these impressions of competent behavior are derived from two perceptions of the other's behavior: **appropriateness** (or, you can follow the rules and fit in) and **effectiveness** (you can use the rules to achieve your goals).[6]

Appropriateness has to do with how well one's behavior fits situational expectations. For example, it would be inappropriate for you to say to your supervisor at work, "If you loved me, you'd give me different hours." Effectiveness concerns whether or not one achieves one's goals in a particular communication situation. For example, if you used intimidating tactics with your supervisor and got your way, you would be considered effective in your communication, although you might ruin your chances for future influence. Together, appropriateness and effectiveness are indicators of behavioral flexibility, or one's ability to adapt to the constraints of a situation.[7]

People judging the communication competence of others are influenced far more by appropriateness than by effectiveness. One can be effective without being appropriate, but others will judge such communication as less competent than communication that is appropriate without being effective. In addition, a strong link exists between appropriateness within the situation and the task and social attractiveness of the actor.[8] Moreover, competence is a communication outcome in its own right. The more successfully people manage or resolve their conflicts, the more competent they appear to each other and to other people.[9] To create competent communication behavior, and by extension competent conflict behavior, requires that motivation, knowledge, context, skills, and outcomes be considered.[10]

APPLICATION 8.2

What seems like appropriate and effective conflict behavior to you? Describe a conflict episode you recently experienced, and list some behaviors that seemed appropriate, inappropriate, effective, and ineffective within it.

Additional characteristics of competent behavior have been suggested by other authors: adaptability, flexibility, supportiveness, ability to take the other person's perspective, ability to see an issue in all its complexity instead of black-and-white extremes, sensitivity to the other person, awareness of one's own behavior, timing of the conflict, and listening to the other person.[11] Some of these characteristics concern the way we think about conflict, and others are actual behaviors within the conflict, lending at least anecdotal support to the idea that competence has several dimensions.

A final point about competent communication behavior comes from Spitzberg, a frequent writer on the subject. He argued that competence is a complex phenomenon and there are value-laden ideas about the positive relationship between competent behavior and desirable outcomes. However, to the extent that people in communication situations, particularly conflict situations, face ambiguous or incompatible personal goals, they will face a number of tensions in the selection of competent behavior. These **dialectical tensions,** as Spitzberg called them, are composed of opposite ideas. Just as a person wishing to bring up a conflict is sometimes torn between the fear of offending the other and the desire to clarify an issue, these tension points demand some sort of balance or resolution; sometimes that resolution favors one demand over the other. The most competent behavior results from paying attention to both of the competing demands so that they are both somehow satisfied.

The most important of these tensions is the appropriateness-effectiveness dialectic. What combination of these two demands constitutes competence? People often assume that ineffective and inappropriate behavior is incompetent, but research indicates that appropriateness alone may generate perceptions of competence, or vice versa, as this narrative indicates:

> I was at a home improvement store on a Friday evening, and there were only three cashiers working (where fifteen could be). It was really busy, and it got worse when one of the cashiers closed. A man hadn't seen the closed sign, and came up carrying two big pots of flowers. He started yelling, "Where's the damn manager? What makes you think you can make all of us wait? Who do you think you are?" He was really angry. It didn't matter that he pretty much said what the rest of us were thinking. We hadn't said it because it didn't look like it would do any good. We all just sort of edged away from him and tried not to look at him.

Within the appropriateness-effectiveness dialectic are five other tensions:

1. *Politeness versus assertiveness:* Assertive people often get what they wish, but others sometimes do not like the way they achieve their goals. Consider this narrative of assertive behavior (at least, from the actor's point of view):

> I went to the student employment office to get information about how my student worker would be paid and asked about her papers. The person who answered me started off with a disclaimer that she knew nothing about student employment and that those who did would not be in until the following day, and then she proceeded with irrelevant information. I stopped her mid-sentence, thanked her, and said I would come back when the person who did know the information was there. I thought I was being assertive—I did not really wish to hear someone's speculation when it was unfounded. She thought I was very impolite and complained to her supervisor about me, who asked if I could be "more gentle" with student workers. My lack of "politeness" (not allowing the student to finish) resulted in her perception that I was communicatively incompetent and cruel.

2. *Social competence* (in general) *versus relational competence* (with respect to another person): People have habits that work in general, and they also develop habits that work with particular people. A problem arises in using general competence behaviors with a person who does not respond to that particular style or in using a particular style suited to limited relationships in general encounters. In the preceding encounter with the student worker, for instance, the narrator used a style that creates no difficulties in dealing with people who know the speaker well and who understand the hurried communication that results when that person is pressed to accomplish some task. What the narrator forgot was that the small campus where she works prides itself on its "friendly atmosphere" and has many people who expect more elaborate forms of address and longer interactions.

3. *Communality* (focusing on group or relational interests) *versus instrumentality* (focusing on individual interests): There is often a tension between what will benefit the relationship and what might benefit only one of the individuals within the relationship. One person writes:

> I have rarely taken a real vacation with my wife. When we have vacation time and money, she wants to visit her family in Costa Rica. I would rather go someplace different. We have generally wound up visiting her family, but this year, I put my foot down and said that I want to go to England. I have saved for this vacation for three years, and I don't want to go somewhere I have been before. So, she said, "Fine, go alone." I want to spend time with my wife, but it's just not relaxing for me to be with her family. This isn't the outcome I wanted—what I really wanted was for her to come to England with me. But it's not going to cause a divorce either, so we'll go our separate ways this year.

4. *Adaptation versus control:* In order to achieve goals in a situation, people need to have some control over the interaction. Too much control, however, can cause others to feel that they have no say in the way the encounter unfolds. Furthermore, too much planning or controlling can diminish the flexibility needed to change direction when a first strategy fails. Consider this example:

> I am currently enrolled in a conflict management class, and my supervisor took the same class from the same instructor. Sometimes what we know really gets in the way! I plan out my "good" messages, and since he knows where we have to wind up, he "cuts to the chase" and asks me what I want to have happen. Both of us know what we're supposed to do, but sometimes we're trying so hard to control things that we don't get anywhere at all.

5. *Competence versus incompetence:* Sometimes people appear incompetent in a particular situation even though they generally handle conflict in a competent manner. One person's experiences with a parent of a member of her troop underscores this tension:

> My Junior Girl Scout Troop (ages 9–12) meets with a Brownie Troop (ages 7–8) to have enough adults to supervise the girls. Because I had been a leader previously and the Brownie leader had not, I did all the organizational and task items. One day I had a confrontation with one of the mothers of a troop member. The confrontation was over a craft we made where we had to use hot-glue guns. I did not allow her seven-year-old daughter to assemble the craft. We leaders did most of the work. I did allow an eleven-year-old to use a glue gun. She complained that the craft "wasn't special" because all her daughter got to do was

> pick out the pieces for assembly. She then complained about everything else we had done since the start of the troop, comparing our troop to others and claiming that we were doing an inadequate job. I reflected her concerns, pointed out that I had erred on the side of safety with the hot-glue guns, pointed out that we were a combined troop and so were accommodating the needs of a diverse population, and so on. As the confrontation progressed, control became increasingly difficult. I suggested that if she were unhappy, there were other troops her daughter could join. When she got up to the sixth complaint, I became testy and said, "Could we do a reality check here? I am a volunteer. I don't do this full time, I don't get paid, and I'm not actually the Brownie leader—Mrs. P. is. You'll need to direct the rest of your complaints to her." And I walked away.

The narrator's behavior was competent up to a point, but the encounter underscores the notion of relational competence: It is extremely hard to keep following the rules of good conflict management and containment when the other person keeps escalating the conflict and introducing new issues.

The other dialectics of competence include short-term versus long-term objectives, openness/intimacy versus closedness/autonomy, and consistency versus flexibility.[12] In the Girl Scout confrontation, achieving a short-term pleasure by telling off the mother would do nothing to establish a positive long-term relationship with her.

> The Brownie leader helped by explaining how our troop worked and pointing out my efforts. My next encounter with the mother (over planning of a camping trip) was actually polite. Being open about our plans and desires for the troop helped clear the air, particularly with the Brownie leader's intervention. I also started a weekly letter to the parents (one of her complaints was the lack of communication about troop plans). Being consistent in communication appears to be more important than flexibility to this mother; she did not like our occasional spontaneity in meetings, for example, when plans fell through.

The dynamics of competence are complicated, and perceptions of competence may depend on a variety of decisions made in communication situations. We may know what to do yet find it difficult to create competent behavior in real life. Knowledge makes doing possible but does not ensure success. We need to learn how to create competent behavior without having to stop and figure out what to do each time we need to do it.

The goal of instruction in creating competent communication was best explained by Reardon. She argued that some communication behaviors may be classified as spontaneous—unplanned, subconscious, and unmonitored. For example, if you drop a heavy object on your foot, you are likely to say "ouch" and, depending on your level of pain, any number of obscenities (or euphemisms you substitute for them). Other behaviors are categorized as scripted and culture specific; they are learned through socialization, and the planning and monitoring needed to produce them become automatic as time passes. In the United States, if you want the attention of a clerk in a store, you might say, "Excuse me," or "Pardon me," prior to placing your request to get the clerk's attention. You do not have to think consciously about how to make the request. The third kind of communication behaviors are classified as contrived. They involve conscious planning and monitoring in the interaction. Conflict interaction is often contrived in that the participants are more or less aware of their own and the other person's behaviors. In teaching people to behave more competently in communication situations, then, one goal is to move behaviors that previously took monitoring and concentration into the scripted area so that good communication skills become a habit rather than an effort.[13]

APPLICATION 8.3

What part of competent communication behavior comes easily to you? What do you have to struggle to create in a conflict situation? How might you improve your behavior in the long run?

Examining Goals and Effects in Conflict Situations

Still another line of research in conflict and communication has to do with the goals that people have as they enter a conflict and the effects that having such a goal may create, whether intended or not. The goals people develop for their conflict interaction are largely dependent on how they define the conflict or how they identify the central issue of the conflict. In Chapter 2 we argued that in everyday interactions, people often don't think about their goals, or are unable to articulate them well prior to engaging in a conflict. Ideally (and this is a theory chapter), people act best in conflicts when they have clear goals, recognize that the other person has goals, and are flexible enough to find ways to satisfy both person's goals. In theory, one can best understand the focal points of conflict by examining the issues that give rise to it and—by understanding those issues—can begin to comprehend the role of issues and goals in an actual conflict. The **issue** is the focal point of the conflict, the thing that people point to when they are asked what the conflict is about. The topic of issues will be discussed in the next chapter. We define a **goal** as what a person hopes to achieve from engaging in a conflict.

Communication scholars Clark and Delia argue that communicators produce messages to attain one or more of the following three goals:

1. **instrumental goals** that concern solving problems or accomplishing tasks (such as discussing what to do today and deciding to go biking in the mountains)
2. **relationship goals** that concern creating and preserving a particular relationship between interactants (such as discussing your relationship and deciding to be just friends)
3. **identity goals** that concern establishing or maintaining a desired image of the communicator with others (such as saying something that one hopes makes a good impression on the other person).[14]

It is easy to see how such goals become part of conflict situations. An instrumental goal may be the main impetus to a conflict, as when you approach your supervisor to work out your hours when you have been scheduled at times that overlap your other commitments. You may have a relationship goal in mind when you and your dating partner discuss the frequency with which you see each other. Or, you may have an identity goal in mind when you ask someone, whose behavior toward you has changed for the worse recently, whether you have done something to offend him or her.

In addition to having conflict goals that reflect one of these three areas, Benoit and Cahn point out that a conflict message has potential effects on others in the situation in these three same areas, whether or not intended by the person creating the message:

1. **instrumental effects** that result in the solving of problems or in accomplishing tasks (such as discussing what to do today and deciding to go biking in the mountains)
2. **relationship effects** that create or preserve a particular relationship between interactants (such as discussing your relationship and deciding to be just friends)
3. **identity effects** consisting of a certain impression (such as actually impressing others because you appear to know what you are talking about)[15]

In interpersonal relationships, conflicting parties may have similar or different goals and experience similar or different effects. As noted earlier in this chapter, focusing on either the message sender's goals or the message's effects on the receiver is characteristic of the linear view of the communication process. Those communication scholars, who transcend the sender or receiver orientation, may view the process as a whole in which the interaction between communicators is seen as joint ventures and meaning as jointly created. For example, if someone is offended or provoked, communication has occurred whether or not the communicator intended to be abusive. This is important to realize because part of the communication that takes place during a conflict consists of the message sender's behaviors and their effects on the message receiver (for which some communicators do not want to take responsibility).

For example, a male member of a team of coworkers may have uttered a remark that offends his female coworkers. When confronted, the offender may not want to take responsibility for making the remark by claiming that he did not intend to offend the others and accuse them of being "too sensitive." The fact is that the others were offended by his remarks, and he needs to apologize to them. Part of learning how to improve our conflict communication skills involves our taking responsibility for the effects of our messages whether or not these effects were intended.

APPLICATION 8.4

Describe a conflict where the participants had instrumental, relational, and identity goals within the conflict. Which goal was achieved most easily? Which was the hardest to achieve?

Instrumental Goals and Effects of Communication in Conflict

The first goal/effect of communication in interpersonal conflict is instrumental, task accomplishing, goal attaining, problem solving, or issue resolving. For example, Zietlow and Sillars report marital conflicts over the following problem areas: housing, irritability, criticism of the partner, leisure time activities, household duties, and lack of communication, affection, or money.[16] This roommate conflict is one with instrumental goals/effects:

> Basically this problem deals with my roommate, Leslie, who likes to borrow my car. The problem is that she uses my gas and doesn't return it with a full tank. I get angry at her but she doesn't do anything about it.

Essentially, the **instrumental goal** or effect in a conflict is to *convince* someone that you are right. Most writing on the subject of convincing others concerns argumentation and how to improve one's skill in making arguments. Much of the research on the effectiveness of arguments has been conducted in public speaking situations rather than interpersonal; nevertheless, the ability to make a cogent argument in a conflict situation about what you feel and why you feel that way will undoubtedly affect the type of outcome you are able to reach.

One line of research on instrumental goals and effects has to do with the use of evidence in argumentation. Reinard suggests, "Perhaps on no other area of argumentation has so much attention been focused as on the persuasive function of evidence."[17] **Evidence** is whatever another will accept as proof of some claim. In formal argumentation, evidence consists of examples, statistics, and expert testimony from others. In a conflict situation, evidence may be examples of behavior that demonstrate the point the communicator is trying to make (e.g., Noriko shows her roommate the gas gauge as evidence that she has not refilled the tank). According to Rieke and Sillars, "most decision makers are influenced by evidence."[18] Unsurprisingly, research has found that arguments supported by strong evidence are more effective than those employing weak evidence,[19] and new evidence (i.e., previously unknown to the hearer) is frequently more persuasive than familiar information.[20]

Thus, research on message reception indicates positive relationships between argument strength and effectiveness. However, many questions remain unanswered, such as at what point do people abandon arguments in favor of less reasonable tactics, to what extent are people expected to use arguments when in a conflict, and how effective are arguments.

Relational Goals and Effects of Communication in a Conflict

The second goal/effect concerns the establishment, maintenance, and repair of relationships. The **relational goals** and effects of communication in a conflict focus on the degree of commitment to a premarital or marital relationship, love and emotional involvement, jealousy, the influence of friends and relatives, interpersonal trust, separation/breakup/divorce, compatibility, frequency of sex in marriage, satisfaction with sexual relations, and balance of power. Regarding this goal/effect of communication, there are two ways in which it emerges in interpersonal conflict. First, relational issues may be the focus of a conflict. For example, couples may argue about the depth of or commitment to their relationship. Jason's conflict with his housemate over her new boyfriend is one with relationship goals/effects.

> Jennifer, my housemate, and I have been friends since the eighth grade, about seven years. We have gone through life together, thus far, and just recently a problem has cropped up in our relationship. She met a man, with whom she has become quite close, and has been neglecting the friendship we have worked on for so long. I don't want our relationship to suffer because of this man in her life, so I decided to take a stand and tell her how I felt about the matter. This isn't about twenty dollars she owes me or a sweater she borrowed. It's about a lifelong friendship, and the attention deficit I am feeling. My pursuit was tampered with by Jennifer's new friend. We were more or less in battle for her attention.

Second, and possibly more commonly, conflicts over instrumental concerns may have unintended effects on the relationship (e.g., a conflict over a task could lead to relationship dissatisfaction).

Several scholars discuss how our relationships are negotiated or renegotiated in interaction with others. Here "an individual's goals involve defining the relationship in a particular way, and arguments erupt when the partner's acts impede that goal or are expressions of competing goals."[21] Thus, at times conflicts address relationship issues. Given the analysis that suggests that communication is a goal-directed activity, that one goal of communication concerns relationships with others, and that conflict is a form of communication, the claim that people argue over relationship concerns is reasonable.

At least one study shows how relationship goals influence message production. Canary, Cunningham, and Cody found that integrative tactics were used more than competition or avoidance when the person's goal was to change the nature of a relationship.[22] That finding makes sense—if you want to improve your relationship with the other person, you'll get a lot farther by emphasizing what you have in common than by emphasizing your differences or by walking around the situation.

Others have researched indirect effects of conflict on relationships using both survey (questionnaire) and subject diaries to discover what people believe about their conflict practices.[23] This research indicates that people in general believe that some of their conflicts do have effects on their relationships. Many conflicts in the diary data (72 percent) did not affect the relationship, but in the remainder the effects on the relationship were mixed (some positive, some negative). Although it is important to realize that relationships are of different types, communication researchers have repeatedly identified three relational themes that occur in conflicts and are affected by conflict: affect (or the expression of emotion toward the other), control, and longevity.

Some studies examine affect or the emotional effect of conflict by comparing the conflict behavior of relationally satisfied partners with those who are dissatisfied. Usually, it is assumed that conflict has contributed in some way to the partners' reported satisfaction or dissatisfaction with their relationship. For example, after participants rated their marital satisfaction, Canary, Brossmann, Sillars, and Lovette had participants rate their marital satisfaction, and then observed the types of arguments they used. They found that satisfied couples produced different argument sequences from dissatisfied couples. Satisfied couples had a greater proportion of developed argument structures over undeveloped arguables than did dissatisfied couples.

Of the argument structures, satisfied couples engaged in a greater proportion of simple structures, and tended to enact a greater proportion of convergent arguments.[24] Similarly, Canary, Weger, and Stafford discovered that relationship dissatisfaction was associated with reciprocation of diverging sequences (i.e., disagreement statements),[25] whereas Canary and Sillars reported that relationship satisfaction was associated with convergent arguments (i.e., agreement statements).[26]

Other studies pay less attention to what is said than how it is said to show the emotional impact of conflict on relationship satisfaction or dissatisfaction. This line of research becomes especially important in everyday conflict when one considers that marital and engaged couples claim that their partners appear more rational when they avoid getting angry and raising their voices.[27]

Based on the claim that verbal communicative acts are key determinants of marital satisfaction, Ting-Toomey coded verbal disagreements and focused on three types of verbal behavior: integrative (confirming, coaxing, compromising, and agreeing), disintegrative, (confronting, complaining, defending, and disagreeing), and descriptive (socioemotional description and questions, task-oriented descriptions and questions). Ideally, partners who value their relationship should argue in a way that contributes to integration of the relationship and avoid statements that lead to disintegration, but unfortunately the latter course is the more common. According to Ting-Toomey, marital partners typically begin a conflict in a manner directly attacking one another with criticism and negatively loaded statements, followed by attempts to justify oneself and blame the other. Given the natural inclination of people to act in ways that don't benefit the relationship, it is no surprise that we need courses in conflict management.[28]

On a more positive note, Alberts found that the verbal communication of nondistressed couples complained more about their partner's behavior (rather than personality), made more agreement responses, and expressed more positive affect than did distressed couples. Distressed couples complained more about their partner's personality characteristics, offered more countercomplaints, and expressed more negative affect than did nondistressed couples. Interestingly, the two groups of couples did not differ in the number of complaints made, but rather in the way they were made.[29] In addition, Alberts found that well-adjusted couples are twice as likely to engage in types of complaint behavior designated as effective as maladjusted couples. Moreover, less effective complaint behavior occurred more often in maladjusted than well-adjusted couples.[30] Moreover, Newton and Burgoon found that use of supportive strategies in a disagreement was directly related to a partner's satisfaction, whereas use of accusation was negatively correlated with a partner's satisfaction.[31]

Some studies have examined the issues of control, power, and dominance. Roloff and Cloven found that people who feel less powerful than their partners avoid conflicts with them. Therefore, to create conditions conducive to conflicts, both partners must perceive that they have mutual control.[32] Meanwhile, Canary, Weger, and Stafford found that control mutuality (i.e., who influences whom in the relationship) was associated positively with convergent statements (e.g., agreement) and the extent to which points were developed (e.g., elaboration, amplification, and justification).[33]

Finally, relationship longevity may also influence the production of conflicts. Canary and Weger found that the longer the relationship, the more partners structured arguments as convergence sequences (i.e., agreement statements).[34] Similarly, Canary, Weger, and Stafford again discovered that converging arguments were linked positively to the length of the relationship.[35]

Thus, conflict may alter relationships directly when relationship issues are discussed and may produce unintended effects when instrumental or identity goals are being pursued. Although communication researchers have related everyday conflicts to affect, control, and relationship longevity, conflict's effect on other relationship characteristics needs to be examined (e.g., emotional and physical intimacy, trust, commitment, and attitudinal similarity).

Identity Goals and Effects of Communication in Conflict

The third goal/effect of communication and conflict concerns identity management. **Identity goals** and effects of communication include self-esteem, sexual esteem, a male's manhood or masculinity, a female's womanhood or femininity, impression formation and management, egocentrism, appearing to be in control of others, perceptions of oneself, and traditional stereotypes regarding sex roles. As with the relational goal/effect, the identity

goal/effect emerges in a conflict in two ways. First, identity issues may be the focus of a conflict. Alice's conflict with her boyfriend's sister is one with identify goals/effects.

> I am having a problem with my boyfriend's sister. I have been avoiding this situation for over a year and a half. I do not want to stir things up between his family and myself. His sister knows a lot more about me than a boyfriend's family should. Every time my boyfriend and his sister fight, she brings up some fact from my past, in front of their parents. I don't know if she realizes that her comments are hurting me and not her brother. But more importantly, I don't like the feeling of being betrayed and humiliated.
>
> I approached her and said: "Something has been bothering me. Are you free to talk with me for a minute or should I wait until later?" She said: "NO! I am in a hurry to see Danielle." But she stopped a minute and realized she could not wait until later that night to hear what I had to say. She decided to call Danielle and tell her that she would be late. Once you get someone's interest, it is very hard for that person to wait to hear what you have to say.
>
> I told her that something has been bothering me for quite a while. "While in the heat of an argument with your brother, you tend to blurt out unnecessary things about my past in front of your parents. It makes me look bad. At first I thought you were doing it to hurt your brother, but now I am beginning to think that you're doing it to hurt me, or at least to make your parents think that I have flaws, and that I am not good enough for your brother. I would like to find out why you do it, and if by any chance you would reconsider saying anything."

Second, and possibly more commonly, conflicts over instrumental concerns may have unintended effects on the identities of the arguers. For example, two roommates might want to watch different television programs. One could switch channels and tell the other to get lost. The conflict should be over the fair use of the television set, but instead it turns into name calling, put-downs, and personal attacks.

Essentially, the identity goal or effect in a conflict refers to our attempts to negotiate or renegotiate the definition of who we are—our definition of ourselves and the impressions we make on others. Some conflicts directly address the "face of arguers," or the impression they have of themselves. As we will return to this idea later in the chapter on impression management, we'll simply introduce you to some of the research related to identity goals and effects here.

There is, for example, a variety of face-saving strategies that can be used to change how others may perceive your actions and to smooth out negative effects in the relationship. One face-saving strategy is the use of accounts, defined as linguistic devices that serve to change for the better situations that could turn worse and to "repair" one's identity after a personal attack.[36] In essence, accounts explain our behavior to others. For example, accounts are often given as reasons for not complying with a request, rejecting offers, and an inability to answer questions. In all such cases, accounts function to transform what might initially be seen as reproachable behavior to an action seen as justifiable or understandable.

Buttny provides an intensive analysis of one couple's use of blames, criticism, and accounts in marital therapy. Couple therapy is often characterized by recurring instances of partner criticism or blame. Repeated blaming suggests the salience or importance of an underlying issue over which partners disagree. Buttny suggests that recurring blames and criticism may give rise to accounts as a way to defend against the implied change.[37]

Moreover, some writers have argued that conflict can be usefully viewed as a response to threats to one's image, face, or identity. Benoit and Benoit, in their discussion of conflict openings, suggest that aggravating utterances, which potentially threaten the face

of interactants, consistently signal the beginning of a conflict.[38] For example, if you initiate a conflict by insulting the other person (e.g., saying "You're such a slob!" to your roommate), you may threaten the other person's self-image and provoke his or her defensiveness. Consistent with this analysis, Benoit and Benoit also found that three of the four ways conflicts closed tended to repair face.

Research on the role of conflict in identity development has led O'Keefe and Shepherd to claim that identity effects are best viewed as "by-products" of interactions.[39] Canary, Cunningham, and Cody report that competitive strategies were used more when defending oneself (identity management).[40] In addition, Canary and Spitzberg showed that communicators are perceived to be most competent when using positive conflict strategies, whereas their use of avoidance and competitive strategies was negatively linked to perceptions of their competence.[41] Finally, Canary and Spitzberg separated perceptions of self from perceptions of other to show that people perceived themselves as more competent and appropriate than partners judge them. They were most similar to one another for competitive tactics (behaviors) than avoidance as a conflict strategy, and then integration (problem solving) as a strategy.[42]

Our explanation for this finding is that arguers may be more focused on achieving what they want in the conflict situation (their instrumental goal pursuits) than other outcomes, but the people hearing the argument are more sensitive to the impact of conflict tactics on their impressions of the other as a person. Thus, conflict may alter identity directly when identity issues are the subject of discussion and may produce unintended effects when other nonidentity goals (instrumental or relationship) are being pursued. Specifically, the research shows that accounts play a role in conflict to save face and that conflicts themselves may enhance or harm one's identity characteristics such as credibility, persuasiveness, and competence.

Interrelationship of the Three Types of Goals and Effects

Some research addresses the interrelationships among the three types of goals/effects of communication in conflict. Dillard, Segrin, and Hardin suggest that primary or influence goals (instrumental) induce attempts to persuade or influence another person, whereas secondary goals (including relational and identity concerns) modify the message.[43] Similarly, O'Keefe and Shepherd argue that "identity communication is subordinated to some other task."[44] Thus, it appears that although there are three key potential goals (instrumental, relationship, and identity), some communication researchers view the instrumental goals as most important.

Although we would agree that the instrumental goals are often (perhaps even usually) foremost in arguers' concerns, the work on accounts cited earlier demonstrates clearly that identity concerns are often key features of messages. Furthermore, an interesting anecdotal example occurred in Benoit and Benoit's data.[45] One female participant wanted her male partner to tell her something. Eventually he did as she requested, but nonetheless she reported that she lost the argument because her partner became angry. Here the relational consequences of the conflict were more salient to her than the instrumental effect. Thus, we argue that although instrumental concerns may be primary in general, relational and identity concerns occasionally predominate. Because few studies interrelate the three types of goals/effects, and others emphasize the importance of a single goal/effect, it is important to remain aware of the potential importance of all three types. It appears that the three types

are interrelated and vary in importance depending on the social context in which they occur. In the following case study, the tension between instrumental goals, relational goals, and identity goals is resolved in favor of instrumental goals for one person in the conflict, but the other person had hoped for greater attention to relational and identity goals.

Case Study 8.1 ■ *A Conflict about a Conflict*

My boyfriend, Chris, doesn't think that he can express something important without getting, or at least acting, angry. I, on the other hand, would rather let something slip by and ignore it before I would get angry. We both try to work on skills to balance this out. I try to be more assertive in situations and he tries to stay level-headed and not get angry. With that said, here's the story.

We went to the homecoming football game on Saturday night. Chris is an alum and a former football player, so he assumed that it would be free for him to go to the game. We arrived at the game and it was $5 if you weren't a student. I told them that he was an alum. Chris complicated things when he said rather heatedly, "I am not going to pay to get into this game!" The person working the gate asked if he had an alumni ribbon to prove that he was an alum. Chris told them he did not. Then they asked if he had registered with the alumni house. Chris again told them he had not. He was already getting angry when they directed us over to the alumni table to pick up the ribbon that he needed to come into the game. At that table we realized that he had not sent in the correct form to register as an alum. He marched back to the table as I asked him to please not get mad at the people working as they were simply doing their jobs and following the rules. He didn't listen to me, but told them that he was not going to pay to get into the game. So they said, "Okay, see you later." He asserted that he would watch this game and asked who he could talk to in order to get into the game. All this time I was very embarrassed. He was angry for no reason and his approach was getting him nowhere.

Finally, someone known to the alumni staff walked up and asked if he could vouch for Chris. The staff wouldn't allow that either, but said that we could simply enter through another gate. We went there and got into the game. The problem was that I became upset with Chris for the way he acted in that situation. I was embarrassed and I was wondering if he even tried to control his anger at all.

My conflict with Chris occurred during the game when he made the mistake of asking how I thought he had dealt with that situation. I was planning to save that conversation until after the game, but he asked so I told him that I was embarrassed and that I didn't think he needed to get so angry. This got us into a big discussion, but it was a productive conflict. I admitted that even though he hadn't followed the proper rules, he did have the right to go to his homecoming game for free, especially because the only purpose of preregistering was so the alumni staff could brag about how many alumni had attended. He had, after all, played on the football team for three years. But I told him that no matter what his rights were, he wasn't going to get that much accomplished with his behavior. We resolved it with him agreeing to work harder to control his temper and with me agreeing to give him the benefit of the doubt when it comes to his "rights."

From Theory to Action

Why study interpersonal conflict from a communication perspective? Many communication scholars place their discipline in the liberal arts. A liberal education serves to free the individual. It informs individuals so that they are free to exercise choice, empowers them to respond in responsible and constructive ways, and shows them how to apply newly acquired knowledge in everyday life. The study of conflict from a communication perspective fits nicely with the ideals of a liberal education. When faced with a problem to be solved, an interpersonal conflict, or legal dispute, many people are constrained by self-defeating conflict behavior patterns, imprisoned by negative conflict attitudes, and respond in ways that may be described as reactive or ignorant. Conflicting parties need to realize that they have options and are free to make choices that vary in social value and that can affect the quality of their interpersonal relationships. To free the individual, both on an attitudinal level as well as on a behavioral level, people need to learn certain values and attitudes and specific communication skills that encourage constructive problem solving and effective resolution of interpersonal conflicts.

This chapter has focused on how communicators behave in conflict, and the way in which various message behaviors move the conflict to resolution more easily, or make it more difficult for those involved to reach agreement. It is hard to explain conflict using only one explanation—how people think affects how they behave. How others behave toward them affects the kinds of behaviors they will respond with, and also affects the way they are thinking about the conflict. We need to understand both to begin to produce competent behavior in conflict situations.

In Chapter 9, the final chapter of this part on conflict theory, we will explore various lines of research concerning interpersonal conflict, particularly in intimate relationships. Through your understanding of the various conflict theories, and how those theories have led communication researchers to various conclusions, you will better understand why certain attitudes and skills are vital in creating competent conflict behavior.

Notes

1. Leslie A. Baxter, "Accomplishing Relationship Disengagement," in Steven Duck and D. Perlman (Eds.), *Understanding Personal Relationships: An Interdisciplinary Approach* (London: Sage, 1985), p. 245.
2. This is a term coined by William R. Cupach and Brian H. Spitzberg (Eds.), *The Dark Side of Interpersonal Communication* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1994).
3. See, for example, the discussion on pp. 27–32 in Lawrence R. Frey, Carl H. Botan, Paul G. Friedman, and Gary L. Kreps, *Investigating Communication: An Introduction to Research Methods* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1991).
4. Susan Shiminoff, *Communication Rules: Theory and Context* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1980), p. 57.
5. Rebecca R. Rubin, "Communication Competence," in Gerald M. Phillips and Julia T. Wood (Eds.), *Speech Communication: Essays to Commemorate the 75th Anniversary of the Speech Communication Association* (Carbondale, IL: SIU Press, 1990), pp. 94–129.
6. Brian H. Spitzberg and William R. Cupach, *Interpersonal Communication Competence* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1984). Also, a study of perceptions of the competence of others suggests that those perceptions are based on the exhibited behavior's response to the situation rather than knowledge about the person (Larry Haight and Charles Pavitt, "Implicit Theories of Communication Competence 1: Traits, Behaviors, and Situation Differences," paper presented to the Speech Communication Association Convention, Louisville, November 1982).
7. Rubin, "Communication Competence."
8. Daniel J. Canary and Brian H. Spitzberg, "Appropriateness and Effectiveness in the Perception of Conflict Strategies," paper presented at the Speech Communication Association Convention, Denver, November 1985.
9. Brian H. Spitzberg, Daniel Canary, and William R. Cupach, "A Competence-Based Approach to the Study of Interpersonal Conflict," in Dudley D. Cahn (Ed.), *Conflict in Personal Relationships* (Hillside, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1994).
10. Brian H. Spitzberg, "Cans of Worms in the Study of Communicative Competence," paper presented at the International Communication Association Convention, Honolulu, May 1985. Judy C. Pearson and Tom D. Daniels, in comparing Spitzberg's list to others in the literature, reduced this list to knowledge, motivation, and behavior; however, the impact of the context on the

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12. Brian H. Spitzberg, "The Dialectics of (In)Competence," paper presented at the Western Speech Communication Association Convention, Phoenix, February 1991.

13. Kathleen Kelly Reardon, *Interpersonal Communication: Where Minds Meet* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1987).

14. Ruth Anne Clark and Jesse G. Delia, "Topoi and Rhetorical Competence," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 65 (1979), 187–206.

15. William L. Benoit and Dudley D. Cahn, "A Communication Approach to Everyday Argument," In D. D. Cahn (Ed.), *Conflict in Personal Relationships* (Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1994).

16. P. H. Zietlow and Alan L. Sillars, "Life Stage Differences in Communication During Marital Conflicts," *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 5 (1988), 223–245.

17. John C. Reinard, *Foundations of Argument: Effective Communication for Critical Thinking* (Dubuque: William C. Brown, 1991), p. 105.

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33. Ibid.

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35. Ibid.

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37. Ibid.

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