

8

Managing Conflict

"When we all think alike, then no one is thinking."

—Walter Lippman



CHAPTER OUTLINE

What Is Conflict?

Types of Conflict

Conflict and Diversity in Small Groups

Conflict-Management Styles

Collaborative Conflict Management:
Principles and Skills

When People Are Not Cooperative: Dealing
with Difficult Group Members

Case Study: Practice in Applying Principles

Groupthink: Conflict Avoidance

Consensus: Reaching Agreement Through
Communication

Study Guide: Putting Group Principles into
Practice

OBJECTIVES

After studying this chapter, you will be able to:

- Explain why conflict occurs in small groups.
- Describe the negative impact of conflict on group communication.
- List three misconceptions about conflict.
- Describe five conflict-management styles.
- Identify strategies for managing different types of conflict.
- Describe four conflict-management principles.
- Define groupthink.
- Identify six symptoms of groupthink.
- Apply techniques for reducing groupthink.
- Define consensus.
- Apply techniques for managing conflict and reaching consensus in small groups.

Adolph and his brother Rudolph lived in a small German town and had heard about the American sprinter Jesse Owens, who was coming to Germany to compete in the 1936 Berlin Olympics. The two brothers had a small cobbler shop and thought they would try making sports shoes for the famed runner. They approached Owens and asked if he would wear their shoes during the Olympic competition. Owens quickly accepted the offer of free shoes and then won four gold medals. The two brothers parlayed that good fortune into making their small shoe shop into a major producer of running shoes. Just one problem: The two brothers didn't get along. In fact, they fought a lot. Eventually, because of the constant conflict, they decided to go their separate ways. Adolph, whose nickname was "Adi," took half of the shoe-making machines and started his own company on one side of the river in their town. You know it today as Adidas. Rudolph stayed on the other side of the river and called his new shoe company Puma. Their family conflict had thus created two giant running shoe corporations.¹

Conflict is a fact of life. Throughout history, people have been involved in conflicts ranging from family feuds that spawned rival shoe companies to nations that waged war against each other. Communication researchers and social psychologists conclude that when people interact with one another they inevitably disagree.²

This chapter gives you some ideas about the causes of conflict in groups and teams and presents some strategies for managing it. We're not going to tell you how to eliminate group conflict but rather how to understand it and its importance in your group deliberations.

Despite the prevalence of conflict in group and team deliberations, communication researchers Steven Farmer and Jonelle Rothe note that much of what we know about group conflict has been generalized from research that has investigated interpersonal conflict.³ The prime objective of this chapter is to help you understand how conflict in groups and teams can be both useful and detrimental to collaborative decision making.

What Is Conflict?

Conflict is about disagreement. Communication experts William Wilmot and Joyce Hocker define conflict as including four elements: (1) an expressed struggle (2) between at least two interdependent people (3) who perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources, and interference from others, (4) to achieve specific goals.⁴

- *Expressed struggle:* A conflict becomes a concern to a group when the disagreement is expressed verbally or, more often, nonverbally. Early signs of conflict include furrowed brows, grimacing facial expressions, and flashes of frustration evident in the voice. If the conflict persists, words are usually exchanged and unmanaged tempers may flare.
- *Between at least two interdependent people:* From a systems theory perspective, people in a group are *interdependent*; what happens to one person has an impact on others in the group. A conflict between even just two people in a group of five will undoubtedly have an impact on the dynamics of the entire group.
- *Incompatible goals, scarce resources, and interference:* Conflict often occurs because two or more people want the same thing, yet both can't have it. If resources are scarce or if something or someone is blocking what others want, conflict is likely.
- *Achieving a goal:* People in conflict want something. Understanding what the people in conflict want is an important step toward finding a way to manage the conflict.

If a group experienced no conflict, it would have little to discuss. One value of conflict is that it makes a group test and challenge ideas. Conflict can, however, be detrimental to group interaction and group decision making. Conflict has a negative impact on a group when it (1) keeps the group from completing its task, (2) interferes with the quality of the group's decision or productivity, or (3) threatens the existence of the group.⁵

Causes of Conflict

What causes conflict in groups and teams? Conflict results from differences between group members—differences in perception, personality, information, culture, and power or influence. Differences in group members' tolerance for taking risks also contributes to group conflict; some people are comfortable with risk, others aren't.⁶ Because people are unique, their different attitudes, beliefs, and values will inevitably surface and cause conflict. No matter how much they try to empathize with others, people still have individual perspectives on the world. People also differ in the amount of knowledge they have on various topics. In groups, they soon realize that some members are more experienced or more widely read than others. This difference in information contributes to different attitudes. People also have different levels of power, status, and influence over others—differences that can increase conflict. People with power often try to use that power to influence others, and most do not like to be told what to do or think. Conflict can also occur because of disagreement about processes and procedures. Research suggests that entrenched disagreements about process issues (such as how decisions will be made and what the rules and norms are for expressing disagreement) can be more disruptive over the long haul than a simple disagreement about a specific task issue.⁷

Conflict does not just happen. You can often discern phases or stages of conflict development. Communication scholar B. Aubrey Fisher found that group deliberations can be organized around four phases: orientation, conflict, emergence, and reinforcement.⁸ Several researchers have discovered that the conflict phase in groups often emerges in predictable stages.⁹

Conflict in groups can be directed toward people (interpersonal conflict), ideas (task conflict), or both people and ideas.¹⁰ One research team found that conflict often occurs because of perceived inequity; if we think someone has more resources or is getting more than his or her fair share, conflict often results.¹¹ When the conflict is directed toward people, we may first try to manage the conflict by avoiding the individual or the topic of conflict. If the conflict is more task-centered, we usually first try more integrative approaches by seeking solutions that are agreeable to all parties. One of the prime effects of conflict and discord that occurs in groups is that the seeming lack of progress toward the group's goals results in a lack of motivation to keep working at a solution to resolve the conflict.¹² Two of the biggest triggers of conflict occur when people believe they haven't been treated fairly or that they are entitled to something that they didn't receive.

Misconceptions about Conflict

People often have misconceptions about the role of conflict in groups because they think that conflict is bad and should be avoided. With higher rates of divorce, crime, and international political tensions, it is understandable that people view conflict negatively. The following discussion of myths will examine some of the feelings you may have about conflict and point out how a different attitude might improve the quality of your group discussions.¹³

Misconception 1: Conflict Should Be Avoided at All Costs Conflict is a natural byproduct of communication; unless participants in your group share the same attitudes, beliefs, and values (an unlikely situation), there will be some conflict. Several researchers have discovered that conflict is an important, indeed useful, part of group communication.¹⁴ Members who believe that conflict is unhealthy become frustrated when conflict erupts in a group. They should realize that conflict probably will occur and that it is a natural and healthy part of group communication.

Research suggests that when conflict occurs, group members are often challenged to research issues in greater detail and learn more about the issues under discussion.¹⁵ In the end, conflict can enhance learning and encourage more in-depth analysis.

Group conflict can also spur group members to share more information with one another than they would if everyone simply agreed on the issues discussed. Research has found that dissent in a group can uncover hidden agendas. So the quality of group discussion increases when people express different ideas, opinions, and perspectives.¹⁶

Misconception 2: All Conflict Occurs Because People Do Not Understand One Another Have you ever been in a heated disagreement with someone and found yourself blurting out "You just don't understand me!"? You easily assume that conflict occurs because another person does not understand your position. Not all conflict occurs because of misunderstandings, however. You may believe that if others really understood you, they would agree with you. Sometimes, however, conflict occurs because you *have* communicated your position clearly; it's just that others disagree with that position.¹⁷ Yes, of course conflict can result from not understanding what someone says, but some conflicts intensify when a person clarifies his or her point.

Misconception 3: All Conflict Can Be Resolved Perhaps you consider yourself an optimist. You like to think that problems can be solved. You may also feel that if a conflict arises, a compromise will resolve it. However, you should realize that not all conflicts can be resolved. Many disagreements are not simple. For example, fundamental differences between those who oppose abortion and those who support it can obviously not be resolved easily, if at all. Some ideologies are so far apart that resolving conflicts between them is

unlikely. This does not mean that whenever a conflict arises in your group, you should despair and say, "Oh, well, no use trying to solve this disagreement." That position also oversimplifies the conflict-management process. Because some conflicts cannot be resolved, group members may have to focus on differences on which they *can* most likely reach agreement.

Types of Conflict

Communication scholars Gerald Miller and Mark Steinberg identify three classic types of interpersonal conflict: (1) pseudo-conflict, (2) simple conflict, and (3) ego conflict.¹⁸ They suggest that by identifying the type of conflict in a group, you will be better able to manage it. The following sections look at these three types of conflict in the context of a small group.

Pseudo-Conflict: When People Misunderstand One Another

Some conflict occurs because of misunderstandings. **Pseudo-conflict** occurs when individuals agree, but, because of poor communication, they believe that they disagree. *Pseudo* means fake or false. Thus, pseudo-conflict is conflict between people who really agree on issues but who do not understand that their differences are caused by misunderstandings or misinterpretations. "Oh, I see," said Mark after several minutes of heatedly defending a position he had suggested to the group. "I just misunderstood you. I guess we really agree."

To manage pseudo-conflict, consider these strategies:

- Ask others what they mean by terms or phrases they use.
- Establish a supportive rather than a defensive climate if misunderstandings occur.
- Become an active listener by using the skills we discussed in Chapter 7:

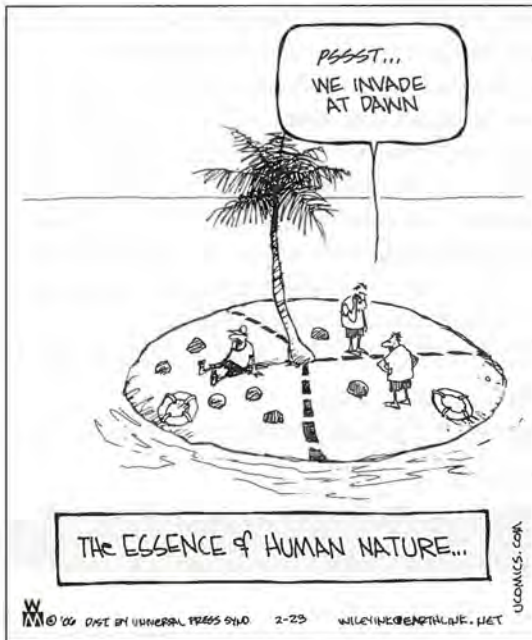
Stop: Tune in to what your partner says rather than to your own thoughts.

Look: Pay attention to unspoken messages and monitor the emotional climate.

Listen: Focus on key details and link them to major ideas.

Groups must find ways of managing conflict and channeling energy constructively. How might conflict be healthy?





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Question: Ask appropriate questions about information or ideas that are unclear to you.

Paraphrase content: To test your understanding, summarize your conception of what your partner says.

Paraphrase feelings: When appropriate, check your perception of your partner's feelings.

Research clearly supports the importance of good listening skills in small groups and teams.¹⁹

Simple Conflict: When People Disagree about Issues

Simple conflict occurs when two people's goals or ideas are mutually exclusive or incompatible. "Simple conflict involves one person saying, 'I want to do X,' and another saying, 'I want to do Y,' when X and Y are incompatible forms of behavior."²⁰ Although the conflict may seem far from simple, it's called "simple conflict" because the issues are clear and each party understands the problem. For example, in a corporation with only a limited amount of money to invest, one board member may

want to invest in real estate and another may want to make capital improvements. The issue is clear; the individuals simply believe the company should take different courses of action.

When you understand what someone says but simply disagree with his or her point, consider using these skills:

- Clarify your perception and your partner's perception of the message.
- Keep the discussion focused on issues, not personalities.
- Use facts that support your point rather than opinions or emotional arguments.
- Use a structured problem-solving approach to organize the discussion: Define, analyze, identify several solutions, evaluate the solutions, select the best one.
- When appropriate, look for ways to compromise.
- Make the conflict a group concern rather than a conflict between just two people; ask others for information and data.
- If there are several issues, decide which issues are the most important, and then tackle them one at a time.
- Find areas of agreement.
- If possible, postpone decisions until additional research can be conducted. Such a delay may also lessen tensions.

Ego Conflict: When Personalities Clash

Ego conflict occurs when individuals become defensive about their positions because they think they are being personally attacked. Of the types of conflict under discussion, this one is the most difficult to manage. Ego conflicts are charged with emotion, and defensiveness in one individual often causes defensiveness in others. Underlying many ego conflicts are power struggles.²¹ "Just because you're the chair of the group doesn't give *you* the right to railroad decision making," snaps Frank. "Well, you're just jealous. You think you should have been elected chairperson," retorts Ed. Based on his study of small group communication, Dennis Devine suggests that a disagreement about issues (simple conflict) can quickly

evolve into a more emotionally charged discussion that becomes personal (ego conflict) unless group members consciously monitor how they interact with one another.²²

If you are trying to mediate an ego conflict, find issues the disagreeing parties can agree on. Identify and emphasize the common ground between them, and encourage them to describe the sequence of events that created the conflict. A key immediate concern when ego conflict flares up in a group is to permit the disagreement to be verbalized without heightening the emotional tension. Just venting anger and irritation won't lessen tensions, nor will simply ignoring the conflict make the tension go away. Research clearly documents that the emotional climate in a group shapes how effectively the conflict will be managed.

Here are additional strategies that may help manage the clash of egos:²³

- Encourage active listening.
- Return the discussion to the key issues under discussion.
- Try to turn the discussion into a problem to be solved rather than a conflict someone has to win.

REVIEW

► SUMMARY OF THREE CONFLICT TYPES

SOURCE OF CONFLICT

Pseudo-Conflict

Individuals misunderstanding each other's perceptions of a problem.

Simple Conflict

Disagreement over a course of action, idea, policy, or procedure.

Ego Conflict

Defense of ego: Individual believes he or she is being attacked personally.

SUGGESTIONS FOR MANAGING CONFLICT

Pseudo-Conflict

1. Ask for clarification of perceptions.
2. Establish a supportive rather than a defensive climate.
3. Employ active listening:
 - Stop
 - Look
 - Listen
 - Question
 - Paraphrase content
 - Paraphrase feelings

Simple Conflict

1. Listen and clarify perceptions.
2. Make sure issues are clear to all group members.
3. Use a problem-solving approach to manage differences of opinion.
4. Keep discussion focused on the issues.
5. Use facts rather than opinions as evidence.
6. Look for alternatives or compromise positions.
7. Make the conflict a group concern rather than an individual concern.
8. Determine which conflicts are the most important to resolve.
9. If appropriate, postpone the decision while additional research is conducted. This delay also helps relieve tensions.

Ego Conflict

1. Let members express their concerns, but do not permit personal attacks.
2. Employ active listening.
3. Call for a cooling-off period.
4. Try to keep discussion focused on issues (simple conflict).
5. Encourage parties to be descriptive rather than evaluative and judgmental.
6. Use a problem-solving approach to manage differences of opinion.
7. Speak slowly and calmly.
8. Agree to disagree.

- Seek to cool the emotional climate by lowering your voice and speaking more calmly, not in a patronizing way but in a way that signals your interest in dialogue rather than emotional argument.
- Be descriptive rather than evaluative or judgmental when discussing the issues of contention.
- Develop rules or procedures that permit differences of opinion.
- Unless the disagreement is central to the nature of the group, agree to disagree and return to areas of agreement.

Conflict and Diversity in Small Groups

As we noted, the root of most conflicts are differences—differences in understanding, perception, attitudes, or preferred action. Yet one of the key advantages of working in groups and teams is the opportunity to capitalize on the different perspectives that group and team members have. As the saying goes, if both of us agree, then one of us is irrelevant. The challenge is to use group diversity without becoming locked in intractable conflict. Although we've emphasized that not all conflict is bad and not all of it should be avoided, entrenched conflict decreases a group's effectiveness. The key to understanding how differences lead to conflict is understanding how group members communicate with one another when conflict occurs. Effective communication helps manage the conflict.²⁴ Two frameworks for describing cultural differences shed light on how some conflicts develop and fester.

Approaches to Conflict in Individualistic and Collectivistic Cultures

In Chapter 1 we noted that some cultures expect and nurture a team or collective approach to working with others; more individualistic cultures, such as that of the United States, place greater value on individual achievement.²⁵ This culturally learned difference can explain why individuals who place different values on the role of the individual or the team manage conflict as they do. Stella Ting-Toomey suggests that people in individualistic cultures are more likely to use direct, confrontational methods of managing disagreements than people who value a collective or team approach to group work.²⁶ She also suggests that people from collectivistic cultures, especially cultures that place considerable stock in nonverbal messages, prefer nonconfrontational and indirect methods of resolving differences. She suspects this difference may be because people from individualistic cultures tend to approach problem solving from a linear, step-by-step perspective, whereas people from collectivistic cultures often use a more intuitive problem-solving process. Ting-Toomey finds that people from individualistic cultures are more likely to use facts or principles as a basis for approaching conflict, negotiation, or persuasion situations.²⁷ People from collectivistic cultures adopt more relationship-based messages to manage differences. It is important for people from collectivistic cultures to save face by not being perceived as having lost a confrontation.

Approaches to Conflict in High-Context and Low-Context Cultures

In Chapter 5 we noted that a high-context culture is one in which considerable weight is given to the context of unspoken messages. In a low-context culture, such as that of the United States, more emphasis is placed on words and their explicit meaning than on implicit, nonverbal cues.²⁸ Researchers have found that people in low-context cultures give

THEORY INTO PRACTICE



Managing Conflict in Diverse Groups: Surface and Deep Diversity

One of the most interesting questions that group communication researchers have explored is how diversity in group membership affects group performance. Although one of the benefits of working in groups is learning from diverse perspectives, do differences in race, ethnicity, culture, age, or gender enhance group quality? Is it only diversity that a person can physically see that influences the communication in groups and teams? And how does the diversity of group members, whether surface-level or deep-level, affect the conflict-management process?

Researchers have made distinctions between surface-level diversity and deep-level diversity. **Surface-level diversity** is defined as the social differences that are easily visible to us—such as differences in ethnicity, race, age,

sex, and other social and observable categories. **Deep-level diversity** includes differences in attitudes, opinions, values, information, and other factors that take time to become evident in groups. They are differences that emerge only after conversation occurs and are not apparent just by looking at someone. As one research team noted, “People who look the same on the surface are expected to share the same task perspective, and people who look different are expected to have a different task perspective to share, even when the surface-level characteristic is not related to the task.”²⁹ Researchers found that we expect people who look like us and hold similar surface-level features to agree with us, and that we are surprised when someone with our own surface-level characteristics disagrees with us.³⁰ Another communication researcher, Ralph Rodriguez, also found that it’s not differences in such demographic characteristics as race, gender, and other observable factors that affect group performance, but rather,

greater importance to task or instrumental issues than do people in high-context cultures.³¹ In high-context cultures, the expressive or emotional aspects of managing conflict take on special importance. In expressive conflict, the goal is often to express feelings and release tension.³² Keeping the relationship in balance, maintaining the friendship, and managing the emotional climate often take a higher priority in a high-context culture than achieving a particular outcome. Here again, saving face and avoiding embarrassment for all parties are more important in high-context cultures than in low-context cultures.

In your group deliberations, knowing that culture and gender differences exist can help you decide which strategies will be more effective than others. We caution you, however, to avoid stereotyping others by cultural, national, ethnic, or gender differences alone. For example, it would be most inappropriate to draw a stereotyped conclusion that all Asians will emphasize expressive rather than instrumental objectives in conflict. Similarly, taking an egocentric view (that is, assuming your perspective is correct) or an ethnocentric view (assuming your cultural methods of managing conflict are superior to those used by others) can be detrimental to effective communication.

Approaches to Conflict When There Are Gender Differences

Gender is another factor that sometimes makes a difference in how people express and manage conflict in groups and teams. Research suggests that people with a feminine style of

differences in underlying values or approaches to problems.³³

Real-Life Applications

What are the best strategies for managing conflict that may stem from differing cultural, racial, ethnic, or gender- or age-based points of view? Consider the following suggestions.

If you are in the minority in a group:

- Make sure that you tactfully, yet assertively, express your ideas, opinions, facts, and information to the group.
- Ask the group to consider an alternative point of view. Your world view is your fundamental outlook on reality. Help the group understand that those with a different life experience or racial, ethnic, or cultural world view may see the issue differently.

If you are in the majority in the group:

- Don't monopolize the conversation; be a gatekeeper by inviting those who have not

spoken up to participate in the conversation.

- Encourage people to share ideas and information via e-mail. Some quieter group members may be more likely to participate in this way than by voicing their opinion in person.
- Be cautious of making sweeping generalizations about those who are from a culture different from your own. Each person's opinions and ideas are unique and may not necessarily be shared by others in the same racial or ethnic group.
- Don't expect a person from a minority group to be a spokesperson for others in that group. Don't, for example, turn to an African American student and say, "So, what do blacks think about this topic?" You can ask what an individual may think or believe, but don't ask someone to speak for a particular group.

managing conflict (either men or women could have a feminine style) are more likely to be interested in issues of equity, empathy, caring, and closeness; to encourage mutual involvement; and generally to focus on relationship issues. A masculine style of conflict management emphasizes achieving specific goals and protecting self-interests, and it is concerned with equality of rights, fairness, and generally focusing on the task.³⁴ Research further finds sex differences (here the research notes differences between men and women—not just gender differences) in conflict-management styles: women tend to emphasize more expressive goals in conflict, whereas men emphasize instrumental or task objectives.³⁵

Although we've noted these generalizations about sex and gender differences, we emphasize that not all men use a masculine conflict-management style and not all women use a feminine style. Such generalizations need to be tempered by considering each individual as unique.

Conflict-Management Styles

Regardless of our cultural backgrounds or the types of conflict we experience, research suggests that each of us behaves in predictable ways to manage disagreements with others. What is your conflict-management style? Do you tackle conflict head-on or seek ways to remove yourself from the fray? Although these are not the only options available for managing conflict, reduced to its essence, conflict-management style often boils down to fight or flight.



3M Meeting Network.

Ralph Kilmann and Kenneth Thomas suggest that your conflict-management style is based on two factors: (1) how concerned you are for other people and (2) how concerned you are for yourself.³⁶ These two factors, or dimensions, result in five conflict-management styles, shown in Figure 8.1. The five styles are (1) avoidance, (2) accommodation, (3) competition, (4) compromise, and (5) collaboration. The following sections examine each style in some detail.

Avoidance

Some people just don't like to deal with conflict, so they avoid it. The **avoidance** conflict-management style is one in which a person attempts to ignore disagreements. Why do people sometimes avoid conflict? People who sidestep conflict may not like the hassle of dealing with a difficult, uncomfortable situation; or they may be unassertive and afraid of standing up for their rights. At other times people avoid conflict because they don't want to hurt someone's feelings.

There are disadvantages to ignoring conflict. If people avoid directly addressing the conflict, the cause of the conflict may remain and emotions may escalate, making the conflict worse. Avoiding conflict may also signal to others that you simply don't care about the needs and interests of others in your group.

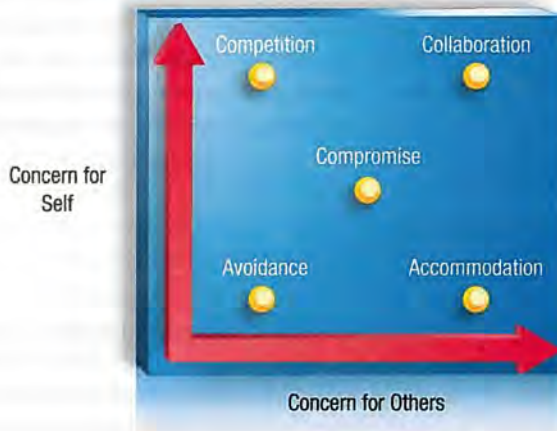
When may it be advantageous to avoid conflict? Taking a break from addressing a difficult, conflict-producing issue may be just what a group needs in some circumstances. Avoiding conflict could give the group time to cool off or to think about the issues that are the source of the conflict. If the conflict is about something trivial or unimportant, it may not be worth the time and effort to manage the conflict.

Accommodation

Some people simply give in to avoid a major blow-up or controversy. The **accommodation** style is another approach used to try to make conflict go away by giving in to the wishes of

FIGURE 8.1

Conflict-Management Styles. The five conflict management styles in relation to concern for others and concern for self.



others. This style is sometimes called a “lose-win” approach. People may accommodate for several reasons. Perhaps they have a high need for approval, and they want others to like them. Or they may want to reduce threats to their sense of self-worth, so they decide to give in rather than defend their own views on the issue. Some people who accommodate appear to maintain their cool, doing what others want them to do; but in reality they are using accommodation to serve their own needs—to get other people to like them.

There may be times when it's disadvantageous to accommodate others during conflict. Giving in too quickly to what others want may cause the group to make a bad decision because the issues underlying the conflict have not been thoroughly examined. Remember, conflict is not inherently bad; it is normal and to be expected. If several people quickly accommodate, then the group has lost a key advantage of using different points of view to hash out the best solution or decision.

But there are also advantages in being accommodating to the views of others. To agree with others can indicate that you are reasonable and that you want to help. If the issue is a trivial matter, it may be best to let it slide. If you realize that your position is wrong, then by all means go ahead and agree with others. If you admit your errors, then others may be more likely to admit their mistakes as well, which can help create a climate of trust. Stubbornly clinging to your position, even when you realize it's wrong, creates a defensive climate. Research suggests that one way to break an upward spiral of conflict is to find something about which members can agree.³⁷ So, accommodating can help the group develop a supportive climate; just don't make a habit of *always* accommodating quickly to squelch *all* disagreement.

Competition

People who have power or want more power often seek to compete with others so that others will accept their point of view as the best position. The **competition** conflict-management style occurs when people stress winning a conflict at the expense of one or more other people. Think of the competition style of conflict management as an arm-wrestling match: One person tries to win so that the other person will lose. Winning is often about power, and power is about exerting control over others. Group members who seek power and position are often the ones who talk the most.³⁸ Research has found that if you're in a group with a competitive, even contentious and cutthroat atmosphere, it's hard to break that cycle and evolve into a more collaborative environment.³⁹ It takes both an awareness of the contentious climate and then talking about how to break out of the competitive environment to develop a more collaborative approach to managing conflict.

There are several disadvantages to creating a group climate built on competition. The competitive style may result in greater defensiveness, messages that blame others, and efforts to control other group members. We've stressed that it's important for group and team members to have a common goal and to work toward the common good. If some group members seek to promote their own interests over the group interests, then the undue competition diminishes the overall power of the group.

We don't want to leave the impression that it's always wrong to compete: If you are certain that you have accurate information and that your insights and experiences can help the group achieve its goal, then stick to your position and seek to persuade others. Likewise, if some group members advocate a course of action that is immoral or illegal or that violates your personal instincts of what is right and wrong, it's appropriate to advocate a different course of action.

But competing with others can be a problem if you try to control without being sensitive to their needs or rights. To compete can also be detrimental if your method of competition is simply to outlast or out-shout others, threaten them, or use unethical means of persuasion, such as knowingly using false information to win. When assertiveness crosses the line into aggression (trying to force others to support your point), most group members find that the competition style becomes tiresome over the course of several group meetings.

Compromise

The **compromise** style of conflict management attempts to find a middle ground—a solution that somewhat meets the needs of all concerned. The word *somewhat* is important. Although on the surface a compromise can look like a “win-win” approach, it can also create a lose-lose result if nobody gets what he or she actually wants or needs. Often when people give up some of what they hope to achieve, no one gets precisely what they want. When trying to reach a compromise, you’re really expected to lose something and win something simultaneously; you also expect others to lose and win. As shown in Figure 8.1, when you compromise, you have some concern for others, as well as some concern for yourself.

Although compromise sounds good in principle, it may not be best in practice. If, for example, no one feels that the compromise solution is a good one, then it probably isn’t the best solution. If group members quickly try to reach a compromise without hashing out why they disagree, the group may not make the best solution or decision. Compromise can be tempting because it seemingly gives in to each position. An old joke says that a camel is a horse designed by a committee. When groups compromise, the final product may not quite be what anyone had in mind, and it may not really solve the problem.

Although we’ve cautioned against too quickly reaching a compromise to manage conflict, there are obvious advantages to crafting a compromise solution. If a decision is needed quickly and a compromise can be achieved to meet the time demands of the situation, then compromise may be best. Compromise may help everyone save face, especially after a long, contentious conflict. Compromise may also maintain the balance of power in a group. A compromise on one issue can create a climate of cooperation and support that will serve the group well as it faces other challenges and disagreements.

Collaboration

To **collaborate** is to have a high concern for both yourself and others. Group members who use a collaboration style of conflict management view conflict as a problem to be solved rather than as a game in which some people win and others lose. In the long run, groups that take the time to collaborate have better results.⁴⁰ When group members work side-by-side, rather than jostling for power and supremacy, the result may be a win-win outcome.⁴¹ Several research studies have found that when there are cultural differences among group members, a collaborative approach to conflict management works best.⁴² Essential elements of a collaborative style include leaving personal grievances out of the discussion and describing problems without being judgmental or evaluative of other people. To compromise is to realize that each person loses something as well as wins something; to collaborate is to take the time to find a solution in which all parties are comfortable with the outcome rather than harboring a sense of loss and sacrifice.

The main disadvantage of a collaboration style is the time, effort, and skill it takes to collaborate. Collaboration requires patience. If your group needs a quick decision, group members may find that taking time to reach a truly “win-win” outcome is more trouble than the

issue at hand is worth. Additionally, some people may use the appearance of collaboration as a pretense to compete: A person who is skilled in negotiation and who uses words well can manipulate a collaborative effort and ultimately “win.”

The obvious advantage to investing time and energy in collaboration is the prospect of both a better solution to issues facing the group and more satisfied group members. Collaboration is also advantageous when the group needs fresh, new ideas because the old approaches of trying to hammer out a solution simply haven't worked. Working to develop a true consensus on a solution that all individuals support is a good goal for most groups to consider.

It may sound like the collaborative approach is always the best conflict-management style to use. And we do think it's worth pursuing in many, if not most, cases. But the best conflict-management style depends on a variety of factors. Research suggests that most people find three things about conflict uncomfortable: (1) the participants fail to reach a clear solution, (2) the conflict is managed poorly, and (3) the participants avoid discussing the key issues and true sources of the conflict.⁴³ There is no specific conflict-management style that “works” in all situations. However, we will discuss research conclusions that identify specific strategies and practices for collaboration that increase the likelihood that all individuals involved in a conflict will be satisfied.

Collaborative Conflict Management: Principles and Skills

What principles and strategies can help a group manage conflict collaboratively? No simple checklist of techniques will miraculously resolve or manage group differences. Research supports the principle that focusing on shared interests and developing a collaborative conflict-management style are usually preferred over more combative conflict-management styles.⁴⁴ However, based on several studies of what works and what does not work when managing conflict, Roger Fisher and William Ury identified the four conflict-management principles discussed in the following sections.⁴⁵

Separate the People from the Problem

When conflict becomes personal and egos become involved, it is very difficult to develop a positive climate in which differences can be managed. As we discussed in Chapter 6, if people feel they are being evaluated and strategically manipulated, they will respond with defensiveness. Separating the person from the problem means valuing the other individual as a person, treating her or him as an equal, and empathizing with her or his feelings. A key to valuing others is to use good listening skills. It is also useful to acknowledge the other person's feelings. Emotion is the fuel of conflict. Several scholars agree that efforts to manage our feelings facilitate the conflict-management process.⁴⁶

One strategy for constructively expressing how you feel toward others in conflict is to use the approach John Gottman and his colleagues call the **X-Y-Z formula**.⁴⁷ According to this method, you say “When you do X, in situation Y, I feel Z.” Here's an example: “When you are 15 minutes late to our staff meetings, I feel like you don't care about us or our meetings.”

When you are the recipient of someone's wrath, you could use the X-Y-Z formula to explain how being yelled at makes it difficult for you to listen effectively. Trying to understand and manage your own and others' feelings helps separate personal issues from issues of substance. Joyce Hocker and William Wilmot suggest that when you are the receiver of someone's emotional outburst, you could consider the following actions.⁴⁸

1. *Acknowledge the person's feelings.*
2. *Determine what specific behavior is causing the intense feelings.*
3. *Assess the intensity and importance of the issue.*
4. *Invite the other person to join you in working toward solutions.*
5. *Make a positive relational statement.*

Research also supports the value of using well-crafted arguments rather than emotion-laden opinions to help those in conflict sort through periods of contention.⁴⁹ No technique or simple formula exists to help you manage the challenging task of separating personal from substantive issues. Using good listening skills, acknowledging how others feel, and expressing your own feelings (without ranting and raving) make a good start toward mediating challenging conflict situations.

Another strategy to help separate personal issues from the differences team members have about the task is to use computer-mediated messages to help the team focus on just the task issues. Posting anonymous messages on a message board or brainstorming anonymously may help deflect team members' fleeting irritation with other team members and keep everyone focused on the issues rather than on personality differences.⁵⁰

Focus on Shared Interests

The words to one old song begin with the advice "Accentuate the positive. Eliminate the negative." A collaborative style focuses on areas of agreement and what all parties have in common.⁵¹ If, for example, you are in a group debating whether public schools should distribute condoms, group members are more likely to have a productive discussion if they verbalize the goals and values they hold in common. A comment such as "We all agree that we want to reduce the spread of AIDS" might be a good place to start such a discussion.

Conflict is goal-driven. The individuals embroiled in the conflict want something. Unless goals are clear to everyone, it will be difficult to manage the conflict well. If you are involved in conflict, determine what your goals are. Then identify your partner's goals. Finally, identify where goals overlap and where there are differences.

Do not confuse a goal with the strategy for achieving what you and a feuding group member want. For example, you may ask the group to make fewer copies on the copy machine. Your goal is to save money because you are in charge of managing the office. Asking that your colleagues make fewer copies is a strategy that you have suggested for achieving your goal. Clarifying the underlying goal rather than only debating the merits of one strategy for achieving it should help unravel clashes over issues or personalities.

Generate Many Options to Solve Problems

During negotiation, group members who adamantly hold to only one solution create a competitive climate. Collaborative conflict managers are more likely to use brainstorming or the nominal-group technique (strategies we will discuss in Chapter 12) or other strategies for identifying a variety of options to manage the disagreement; they seek several solutions to overcome obstacles. Research by Shaila Miranda suggests that using e-mail or other electronic support systems to generate and evaluate ideas can also be a productive way of increasing the number of options a group or team might consider.⁵² Sometimes feuding group members become fixated on only one approach to their goal. When conflict manage-

ment degenerates into a verbal arm-wrestling match, where combatants perceive only one way to win, the conflict is less likely to be managed successfully.

Base Decisions on Objective Criteria

Criteria are the standards for an acceptable solution to a problem. Typical criteria are such things as a limit to how much the solution can cost or a deadline by which a solution must be implemented. If, for example, group members agree that a solution must decrease the spread of AIDS but also not cost more than \$1 million to implement, the group is using criteria to help identify an acceptable solution.

When People Are Not Cooperative: Dealing with Difficult Group Members

Evidence suggests that managers spend up to 25 percent of their time dealing with conflict.⁵³ One author boldly claims that 98 percent of the problems we face are “people problems.”⁵⁴ Scholars call them “group deviants”; you may call them a pain in the neck. Even though we hope that you will not have to deal with difficult or cantankerous group members, we are not naive. Not all group members will separate people from the problem, focus on shared interests, be eager to search for more alternatives, or base decisions on objective criteria. Our individualistic cultural traditions often make it challenging to develop collaborative groups and teams. Research suggests that if you think you are a typical group member who abides by the norms and rules of the group, you are more likely to be upset by someone who obstructs the group process.⁵⁵ You’re more likely to label someone a deviant if you think you are not deviant in your own team behavior. It sometimes takes special “people skills” to deal with some group members. Drawing on the principles and skills of the collaborative conflict-management style, we offer the following tips for dealing with the more difficult group members.

Manage Your Emotions

When we are emotionally charged, we may find it difficult to practice rational, logical methods of managing conflict. One researcher offers this description of what happens to our bodies when we become upset:

Our adrenaline flows faster and our strength increases by about 20 percent. . . . The veins become enlarged and the cortical centers where thinking takes place do not perform nearly as well. . . . the blood supply to the problem-solving part of the brain is severely decreased because, under stress, a greater portion of blood is diverted to the body’s extremities.⁵⁶

It’s normal to feel angry when someone seems constantly to say or do things that make you feel judged or evaluated. In that situation, you may say or do something you later regret. Although some people advocate expressing anger to “clear the air,” expressing uncensored emotions can make matters worse. On the other hand, communication researchers Barbara Gayle and Raymond Preiss confirmed what most of us know intuitively: Unresolved conflict is a breeding ground for emotional upheaval in groups and organizations.⁵⁷ Although it’s been said that time heals all wounds, there are instances

CASE STUDY

➔ Practice in Applying Principles

You would think that board members of the Buckner Valley food bank would be, for the most part, pleasant, selfless people who were trying to give something back to the community by volunteering their time to help provide food for those who needed a little help. Yet the board members often found themselves embroiled in conflict, due in part to some of their personalities.

Jeff meant well, but he seemed to have a need to dominate the board. He talked too much; and although he was not the current board chair, he wanted to insist that his ideas were the ones to be implemented. Jeff's dominance made other board members reactively reject his ideas, even when the ideas were good ones, such as purchasing a new van to make food deliveries. Tired of Jeff's overly bombastic style of trying to get his way, they usually disagreed with him regardless of the merit of his suggestions.

Aiden also meant well, but he missed about half of the twice-monthly meetings. He often didn't follow through on assignments. Yet he liked being on the board because it looked good on his resume; he was

planning on running for city council next year and wanted to demonstrate his concern for the community by being on the board. Even when Aiden was present he seemed mentally absent; he didn't say much, even though as manager of the local grocery store he had much to offer.

Jessica was a hard worker—maybe too hard. She always followed through on her assignments and had little patience for people who didn't do what they were supposed to do. She did more than just raise her voice when expressing her concerns; she yelled and often screamed obscenities at members who made the smallest errors or mistakes. Because of her hard work, the board needed her; but members were frankly a bit afraid of her wrath and just kept quiet when she hollered at them. They didn't want to upset her further because they knew she would holler even louder.

Hudson always thought the food bank was running out of money (even when it wasn't). He longed for the good old days when just he and C. J. ran the food bank. So Hudson was typically against any new idea,



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when ignoring hurt feelings can make the conflict escalate. Leaders and team members need to recognize when to be active in addressing emotional volatility.⁵⁸ Research has confirmed that teams comprised of people with a well-developed sense of emotional intelligence (that is, they have empathy for others and are better able to manage their emotions) have less contentious and more productive meetings.⁵⁹

Consider the following five strategies for managing your emotions during conflict.

1. *Be aware of your anger level.* Candidates for anger management programs don't monitor their emotions well; before they know it, their emotions boil over. Uncensored emotional outbursts rarely enhance the quality of communication. An emotional purge may make you feel empowered momentarily, but it usually only escalates conflict and tension.⁶⁰
2. *Breathe.* It may sound too simple, but it works. As you become aware of your increased emotional arousal, take a

especially anything that cost money. When strategies were suggested to raise more funds, Hudson was against it; he didn't agree with the philosophy "It takes money to raise money," so he blocked most new ideas.

C. J., current board chair, was the glue that held the board together. She was mild-mannered yet hard-working and talented at keeping the other board members moving forward (most of the time). Yet she was getting weary of the constant bickering, power struggles, and inactivity on the part of some.

It was time for the board to organize the annual holiday gift basket program for Buckner Valley, yet the board just wasn't making progress. The need was greater this year than ever because of the downturn in the economy. Many people had lost their jobs and would have no holiday if it weren't for the food bank. Jeff had a good idea for streamlining the operation so that more families could be fed, but other members rejected his idea because they didn't want Jeff to get credit for the idea. Since Aiden ran the grocery store he could make a major difference in the community, but he didn't have time to attend many meetings. He just didn't seem to have time or interest. Hudson didn't want to spend a dime more than what was spent last year and was against any new plan that

might cost more money. Jessica was at her prickly best, and, although she could do the work, she had nothing but critical comments for her fellow board members. C. J. knew the Buckner Valley community was depending on the board, so she was intent on doing whatever she could to feed even more people this year—families were depending on it.

Questions for Analysis

1. Based on the descriptions of pseudo, simple and ego conflict described on pages 176–78, what type or types of conflict do you see evident on the board?
2. What different styles of conflict management do you see among the board members? How do those different styles affect the level of conflict among board members?
3. Which collaborative conflict-management principles and skills presented on pages 185–87 would be helpful for board members to implement to address the recurring conflicts they were experiencing?
4. Based on the strategies presented in Table 8.1 on page 192, what suggestions would you make to help manage the array of personalities present on the board?

slow, deep breath. A deep breath can help calm you and manage the physiological changes that adrenaline creates. A slow, deep breath can help soothe your spirit and give you another focus besides lashing out at others.

3. *Use self-talk.* Your thoughts are linked to your feelings. You can affect your emotional state by first being aware that you are becoming upset and then telling yourself to calm down and stay focused on the issues at hand. Eleanor Roosevelt's observation that "no one can make you feel inferior without your consent" is an acknowledgment of the power of self-talk to affect your emotional response to what others say and do.
4. *Monitor your nonverbal messages.* Emotions are usually communicated nonverbally rather than verbally. Monitoring your emotional signals (such as noting whether your voice gets louder, your facial expression less friendly, and your gestures more dramatic or emphatic) can help de-escalate an emotionally charged situation before it erupts. Speaking more slowly and calmly, maintaining direct eye contact, and adopting a neutral facial expression can help ensure a climate of civility and decorum. We're not suggesting that you manipulate your nonverbal behavior so that you feel inauthentic or that you speak in a patronizing tone. However, being aware of how your nonverbal messages contribute to the emotional climate can help bring the emotional temperature down a degree or two.

5. *Avoid personal attacks.* When conflict gets personal (ego conflict) it becomes more difficult to manage. Calling people names and hurling negative personal messages at others usually adds to a deteriorating emotional group climate.

Don't **gunny-sack**. Gunny-sacking is dredging up old problems and issues from the past, like pulling them out of an old bag, or gunny sack, to use against your partner. Bringing up old problems that can't be changed now only serves to make matters worse, especially when emotions are raw. Focus on the present and what can be discussed now and changed in the future, rather than reliving past problems.

Describe What Is Upsetting You

Try to avoid lashing back at the offending person. Use a descriptive "I" message to explain to the other person how you are feeling; for example, "I find it difficult to listen to you when you raise your voice at me," or "I notice that is the fourth time you have interrupted me when I was trying to explain my point." Keep in mind that the goal is not to increase the conflict. "You shouldn't yell at me" or "You shouldn't interrupt me" are examples of "you" statements. Such statements are evaluative and are likely to increase resentment and anger. Although we recommend that you manage your emotions during the heat of conflict, we're not suggesting that you can't express your feelings. In fact, one study found that team members who constructively express how they feel can enhance the decision-making process.⁶¹ Individuals who are aware of their own feelings and positively manage what one team of researchers called *affective influence* tend to develop better solutions and make better decisions.

Disclose Your Feelings

After describing the behavior that offends or irritates you, tell how you feel when the behavior occurs: "When I'm interrupted, I feel that my opinion isn't valued," or "I become increasingly,

COLLABORATING ETHICALLY



What Would You Do?

Imagine that you are a member of a work team whose job is to recommend new software purchases for your company. Your team is led by the talented Tim, who runs a good team meeting. There are, however, two members of the team, Rita and Rob, who seem to be jealous of Tim's consistent ability to accomplish his objectives. In reality both Rita and Rob would like to lead the team. But as long as Tim enjoys the support of the other three team members, they figure they'll just have to wait until Tim's leadership skill and knowledge is challenged.

Having lunch at the company cafeteria, you overhear Rita and Rob, the two want-to-be-leaders, plotting to challenge Tim at the next meeting. They are planning to lodge a critical attack on Tim's new software initiative. They think the conflict they stir up will cause other team members to question Tim's leadership abilities and provide an opening for their own ascendancy to co-leading the group. If Tim knew about the planned attack he could be prepared to respond to Rita and Rob's criticism. Although you're not particularly a friend of Tim's, should you tell him about the planned leadership challenge, or just keep quiet and see how Tim deals with the conflict at the next team meeting?

What would you do?

frustrated when I try to contribute to our meeting but I don't feel you are listening." When disclosing your feelings, try to avoid such emotional overstatement as "I've never been so upset in all my life." Such hyperbole raises the emotional stakes and can trigger a new volley of retorts.

Two researchers have found that simply prefacing a statement with the word "I," as we suggested you do when using "I" language, may sometimes be too subtle to help defuse a conflict.⁶² You may need to add a longer justification when you provide negative emotional information to another group member. We call this using *extended "I" language*, which is a brief preface to a feedback statement. You might begin by saying something like "I don't want you to take this the wrong way. I really do care about you and I need to share something with you," or "I don't think this is completely your fault. Yet I find myself becoming more frustrated when I hear that you've talked to others about me." These extended comments may have a better chance of taking the sting out of a negative message than simply beginning a sentence with the word *I* instead of the word *you*. There are no magic words that will de-escalate conflict. Being sensitive and thoughtful about how others may respond to your messages can help you express your ideas in ways that are more likely to be heard rather than immediately rejected.

Return to the Issue of Contention

The only way to return to a collaborative style is to get back to the issue that is fueling the disagreement. Avoiding the issue will not resolve the issue.⁶³ Sometimes one of those in conflict has a hidden agenda that makes it difficult to confront the key issues. A wise person once said, "Often what we fight about is not what we fight about." Although an argument may seem on the surface to be about a substantive issue—such as which solution to adopt or whose research to use—the underlying issue may be about power and control. Only if the underlying issue is exposed and addressed will the conflict be managed.

These general suggestions provide basic principles for dealing with difficult group members, but you may need more specific strategies for managing such people. Table 8.1 offers several specific ways to deal with group members who perform such self-focused roles as dominator and blocker or who are irresponsible or unethically aggressive. Remember: *No one can change the behavior of another person*. But competent communicators have the knowledge, skill, and motivation to respond appropriately and effectively to others' behavior, even when that behavior is difficult, self-serving, or unethical.

Groupthink: Conflict Avoidance

Groupthink is the illusion of agreement⁶⁴—a type of thinking that occurs when a group strives to minimize conflict, maximize cohesiveness, and reach a consensus without critically testing, analyzing, and evaluating ideas. Columnist William Safire notes that the term *groupthink* first appeared in a 1952 *Fortune* magazine article by William H. Whyte, Jr.⁶⁵ When a group reaches decisions too quickly, it does not properly consider the implications of its decisions. Groupthink results in an ineffective consensus; too little conflict often lowers the quality of group decisions. When a group does not take time to examine the positive and negative consequences of alternative decisions, the quality of its decision is likely to suffer.⁶⁶

Sociologist Irving Janis believes that many poor decisions and policies are the result of groupthink.⁶⁷ In 1999, eleven students at Texas A&M University were tragically killed when the traditional pre-football-game bonfire they were building collapsed; many other students

TABLE 8.1**How to Deal with Difficult Group Members**

What the Group Member Does	Options for Managing the Problem
Dominates: Tries to tell people what to do without seeking permission from the group; tells rather than asks; monopolizes the conversation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Use gatekeeping skills to invite other group members to participate; explicitly state that you'd like to hear what others have to say. 2. In private, ask the dominating group member to be less domineering and to give others an opportunity to participate. 3. Channel the dominator's energy by giving him or her a specific task to accomplish, such as recording the minutes of the meeting or periodically summarizing the group's progress. 4. The group or team may collectively decide to confront the domineering member; clearly describe the behavior that the group perceives as inappropriate.
Blocks Progress: Has a negative attitude. Is often stubborn and disagreeable without a clear reason. When the group is making progress, the blocker seems to keep the group from achieving its goal.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ask for specific evidence as to why the blocker does not support the group's position. 2. Calmly confront the blocker and explain how consistently being negative creates a negative group climate. 3. Use humor to help defuse the tension that the blocker creates. 4. Assign the blocker the role of devil's advocate before the group makes a decision; giving the blocker permission to be negative at certain times can help the group avoid groupthink.
Is Irresponsible: Does not carry through with assignments; is often absent from or late to meetings	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Speak to the offending group member privately and convince him or her to pull his or her own weight. Explain how his or her irresponsibility is hurting other group members and the overall success of the group. 2. Assign a mentor. Call the person or send an e-mail to remind him or her to attend the meeting. Ask for a progress report on the status of assigned work. Work one-on-one trying to help the irresponsible member see how his or her behavior hurts the group. Provide more structure. 3. If confronting the offending group member first privately and then collectively does not get results, ask for help from a supervisor or instructor. 4. Clarify who will get the credit. To minimize social loafing, tell the offending member that when the final product is complete, the group will clearly indicate her or his lack of participation.
Is Unethically Aggressive: Is verbally abusive toward other group members or purposefully disconfirms others. Tries to take credit for the work of others	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Do not accept unethical behavior in silence. Immediately describe the offensive behavior to the aggressor, and indicate its negative effect on individuals or the entire group. 2. Several group members may confront the offending group member collectively. The group as a whole should not tolerate mean-spirited actions toward others. 3. Become an advocate for other group members; support those who are attacked or singled out. 4. Seek help from an instructor or supervisor or from someone in authority outside the group to stop the unethical, offending behavior. Sometimes a bully only responds to a person of greater power.

were injured. Investigators found that a structural engineering professor had for years tried to warn university officials that the bonfire's design was unsafe; other engineering faculty members who also thought the bonfire was a disaster waiting to happen finally stopped trying to influence the university because no one would listen.⁶⁸ The decision to launch the flawed space shuttle *Challenger* on that unforgettable January morning in 1986 was also tinged by groupthink.⁶⁹ Corporate executives and others did not challenge assumptions in the construction and launch procedures; disaster resulted. The pressure for consensus resulted in groupthink. In hindsight, one contributing cause of the 2002 *Columbia* shuttle disaster was believed to have been groupthink as well.

Yet another example: The Congressional 9/11 commission, investigating why U.S. intelligence organizations were not as vigilant as they should have been in anticipating the terrorists attacks on September 11, 2001, concluded that groupthink was a contributing factor. The commission also found that leaders and analysts in intelligence organizations reached conclusions about the presence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq that were based on unchallenged assumptions and unverified information.⁷⁰

The Texas A&M bonfire tragedy, the *Challenger* and *Columbia* shuttle disasters, and the terrorist attacks of September 11 are dramatic examples of how groupthink has contributed to faulty decision making. The groups and teams in which you participate are equally susceptible to this illusion of agreement.

Groups with highly esteemed leaders are most prone to groupthink. Because these leaders' ideas are often viewed as sacrosanct, few members disagree with them. A group may also suffer from groupthink if its members consider themselves highly cohesive and take pride in getting along well with one another and providing support and encouragement for members' ideas.

One research study found that groupthink is most likely to occur when (1) the group is apathetic about the task, (2) group members have low expectations about their ability to be successful, (3) there is at least one highly qualified, credible group member, (4) one group member is exceptionally persuasive, and (5) there is a norm that group members should conform rather than express negative opinions.⁷¹ Research further suggests that you are more likely to think groupthink is a problem in your group after your group has struggled and gotten off the track.⁷² Teams are better able to diagnose groupthink as the culprit in making groups wobble *after* the wobbling is over rather than during a group's struggle. So it's important that you recognize the symptoms of groupthink while your group is demonstrating those symptoms rather than after the damage has been done.

Although some small group communication scholars question the theoretical soundness of the theory of groupthink, it continues to serve as a useful and practical way of helping groups understand why they make poor decisions.⁷³

Symptoms of Groupthink

Can you identify groupthink when it occurs in groups to which you belong? Here are some of the common symptoms of groupthink.⁷⁴

Critical Thinking Is Not Encouraged or Rewarded If you are working in a group that considers disagreement or controversy counterproductive, chances are that groupthink is alive and well in that group. One advantage of working in groups is having an opportunity to evaluate ideas so that you can select the best possible solution. If group members seem proud that peace and harmony prevail at their meetings, they may suffer from groupthink.

Members Believe That Their Group Can Do No Wrong During the 1972 presidential election, members of the committee to reelect President Nixon did not consider that they might fail to obtain information from Democratic headquarters. They thought their group was invulnerable. But the burglary of the Watergate office and the subsequent coverup ultimately led to the resignation of President Nixon. This sense of invulnerability is a classic symptom of groupthink. Another symptom is that members dismiss potential threats to the group as minor problems. If your group is consistently overconfident in dealing with problems that may interfere with its goals, it may suffer from groupthink.⁷⁵

Members Are Too Concerned about Justifying Their Actions Members of highly cohesive groups like to feel that they are acting in their group's best interests. Therefore, groups that experience groupthink like to rationalize their positions on issues. A group susceptible to groupthink is too concerned about convincing itself that it has made proper decisions in the past and will make good decisions in the future.

Members Apply Pressure to Those Who Do Not Support the Group Have you ever voiced an opinion contrary to the majority opinion and quickly realized that other members were trying to pressure you into going along with the rest of the group? Groups prone to groupthink have a low tolerance for members who do not "go along." They see controversy and conflict injected by a dissenting member as a threat to *esprit de corps*. Therefore, a person voicing an idea different from the group's position is often punished.⁷⁶

Sometimes pressure is subtle, taking the form of frowns or grimaces. Group members may not socialize with the dissenting member, or they may not listen attentively to the dissident. Usually their first response is to try to convince this member to reconsider his or her position. But if the member still does not agree with the others, he or she may be expelled from the group. Of course, if a group member is just being stubborn, the others should try to reason with the dissenter. Do not, however, be too quick to label someone as a troublemaker simply because he or she has an opinion different from that of other group members.

Members Often Believe That They Have Reached a True Consensus A significant problem in groups that suffer from groupthink is that members are not aware of the phenomenon. They think they have reached genuine consensus. For example, suppose you and your friends are trying to decide which movie to rent on Friday night. Someone suggests *The Lord of the Rings*. Even though you've already seen the movie, you don't want to be contentious, so you agree with the suggestion. Other group members also agree.

After your group has seen the movie, you overhear another one of your friends say, "I enjoyed the movie better when I saw it the first time." After a quick poll of the group, you discover that most of your friends had already seen the movie! They agreed to see it only because they did not want to hurt anyone's feelings. They thought everyone else was in agreement. Although the group appeared to reach consensus, only a few people actually agreed with the decision. Therefore, even if you think that the rest of the group agrees and that you are the only dissenter, your group could still be experiencing groupthink. Just because your group seems to have reached a consensus does not necessarily mean that all the members truly agree.

Members Are Too Concerned about Reinforcing the Leader's Beliefs Leaders of small groups often emerge because they suggest some of the best ideas, motivate group members, or devote themselves to group goals more than others do. If group members place too much emphasis on the credibility or infallibility of their leader, groupthink may occur. Leaders who like to be surrounded by yes people (those who always agree with their ideas)

lose the advantage of having their ideas tested. Most people do not like criticism and do not like to be told that their ideas are inept or inappropriate. Therefore, group leaders are understandably attracted to those who agree with them. Leaders sensitive to the problem of groupthink will solicit and tolerate all viewpoints because testing the quality of solutions requires different opinions.

One researcher has found empirical support for the symptoms of groupthink. Rebecca Cline found that groups exhibiting groupthink do express more agreement without clarification and also use simpler and fewer substantiated agreements than groups that avoid groupthink.⁷⁷ She also found that groups that experience groupthink spend about 10 percent more of their discussion time making statements of agreement or disagreement than other groups. Groups that experience groupthink perpetuate the illusion of agreement by sprinkling in frequent comments such as “Yeah, I see what you’re saying,” “That’s right,” or “Sure.”

REVIEW

► SYMPTOMS OF GROUPTHINK

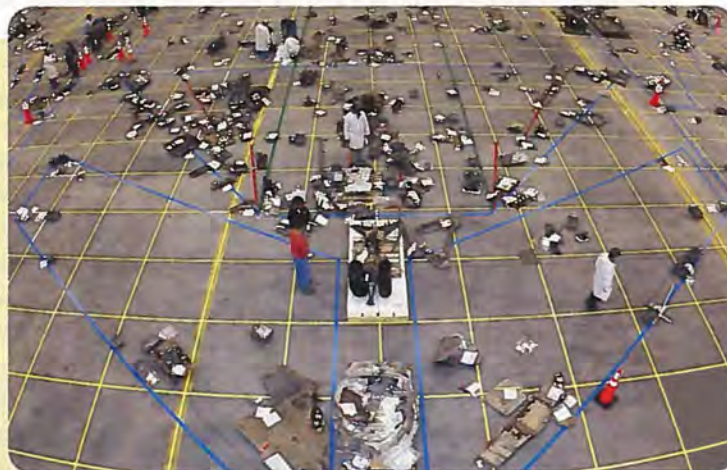
- Critical thinking is not encouraged or rewarded.
- Members think their group can do no wrong.
- Members are too concerned about justifying their actions.
- Members apply pressure to those who do not support the group.
- Members often believe that they have reached a true consensus.
- Members are too concerned about reinforcing the leader’s beliefs.

Suggestions for Reducing Groupthink

How can you reduce the chances of groupthink’s occurring in your group? Consider the following specific suggestions, based on Janis’s initial observations as well as on the theories and the research of several small group communication researchers.

Encourage Critical, Independent Thinking The leader should make clear that he or she does not want the group to reach agreement until each member has critically evaluated

Technicians examine debris from the space shuttle *Columbia* at Cape Canaveral. Some blame the disaster, in part, on groupthink at NASA.



the issues. Most group leaders want to command the respect of their groups, but a leader's insistence that the group always agree with him or her does not encourage respect; instead, it may demonstrate a fear of disagreement. Thus, if you find yourself a leader in a small group, you should encourage disagreement—not just for the sake of argument, but to eliminate groupthink. Even if you are not a leader, you can encourage a healthy discussion by voicing any objections you have to the ideas being discussed. Do not permit instant, uncritical agreement in your group.

Be Sensitive to Status Differences That May Affect Decision Making Group members should not yield to status differences when evaluating ideas, issues, and solutions to problems. Instead, they should consider the merits of suggestions, weigh evidence, and make decisions about the validity of ideas without being too concerned about the status of those making suggestions. Of course, this is easier said than done.

Numerous studies suggest that a person with more status is going to be more persuasive.⁷⁸ Cereal companies know this when they hire famous athletes to sell breakfast food. The implied message is “Don’t worry about the quality of the product. If this Olympic gold-medal winner eats this stuff, you’ll like it too.” The athlete’s fame and status do not necessarily make the cereal good; however, you still might buy the cereal, making a decision based on emotion rather than fact. Group members sometimes make decisions this way, too. Avoid agreeing with a decision just because of the status or credibility of the person making it. Evaluate the quality of the solution on its own merits.

Invite Someone from Outside the Group to Evaluate the Group’s Decision-Making Process Sometimes an objective point of view from outside the group can identify unproductive group norms more readily than group members can and thereby help prevent groupthink.⁷⁹ Many large companies hire consultants to evaluate organizational decision making, but you do not have to be part of a multinational corporation to ask someone to analyze your group’s decision-making process. Ask someone from outside your group to sit in on one of your meetings. At the end of the meeting, ask the observer to summarize his or her observations and evaluations of the group. An outside observer may make some members uncomfortable, but if you explain why the visitor is there, the group will probably accept the visitor and eagerly await objective observations.

Assign a Group Member the Role of Devil’s Advocate If no disagreement develops in a group, members may enjoy getting along and never realize that their group suffers from groupthink. If you find yourself in a group of pacifists, play devil’s advocate by trying to raise objections and potential problems. Assign someone to consider the negative aspects of a suggestion before it is implemented. It could save the group from groupthink and enhance the quality of the decision.

Research by Ernest Borman suggests that some groups include a person who assumes the **central negative role**.⁸⁰ It’s called a central negative role because the person seems to be a central figure in routinely having negative things to say about the leader’s ideas or other group members’ suggestions. The central negative person may offer negative comments to challenge the leader’s power and position in the group. Although having someone play a strong central negative role in the group can be annoying, it can also be useful. Rather than routinely trying to shut down the central negative role person, acknowledge the value that can come from having someone periodically challenge the ideas and opinions of the leader, other members, or the entire group. It’s important, however, that the central negative person not make his or her critiques personal. If the criticism is focused on issues and not personalities, the central negative person can fulfill a useful purpose in helping the group avoid groupthink.

VIRTUAL COMMUNICATION



Whether you're interacting in person or using e-mail or other mediated messages, the same factors that contribute to conflict can arise. The limited amount of nonverbal cues in mediated settings appears to have an effect on how mediated teams manage conflict.

One research group found that when groups negotiate differences in computer-mediated settings, as conflict escalates group members tend to decrease the intensity of forcefully insisting how the conflict should be resolved.⁸¹ In addition, the researchers found that as conflict increases, negotiators generally tend to avoid conflict rather than addressing it head on. When communicating face-to-face during conflict, team members are more likely to try to control the behavior of others, and there is a more reciprocal, tit-for-tat escalation of conflict than in mediated settings.

Another study found that when attempting to brainstorm and generate ideas, members of computer-mediated groups experience more negative conflict management behaviors than those in face-to-face groups; the computer-mediated groups are less effective in managing conflict.⁸² The results suggest that it may be more difficult to manage conflict in a productive way in computer-mediated groups than in face-to-face groups.

Research has also found that if a group has relational conflict, especially if the conflict is intensely personal, it may be best to sort the conflict out in person rather than using e-mail or other mediated methods. If the issue is a difference of opinion about a technical issue, then e-mail can be a useful way of clarifying and sharing information. But if it's a pesky relational conflict, it's best to meet in person.⁸³

Another research study explored the effects on conflict-management styles of participating in virtual teams—whether team members are avoidant, competitive, or collaborative.⁸⁴ They found that it's not a good idea to suppress ideas and suggestions that are in conflict with those of other virtual team members. Avoiding conflict had a negative effect on team performance. Confronting conflict directly typically resulted in a more positive team outcome. The researchers also found that without the accompanying nonverbal cues, team members' attempts to negatively evaluate others had less of a sting. Collaboration was perceived as a positive strategy in both virtual teams and face-to-face teams. And attempting to reach a compromise, especially an early compromise before team members have a chance to discuss the issues, is not as productive in virtual groups as it is in face-to-face groups.

Putting Research into Practice

What are the best ways to manage conflict when it occurs in mediated or online groups?

- Select the most appropriate conflict-management style. Cooperation and collaboration appears to be the best first approach to use when conflict occurs in mediated settings.
- Don't sweep disagreements under the rug. Address differences of opinion, but do so thoughtfully and politely. Without contemptuous nonverbal cues, you may be able to express your differences of opinion with less of a bite because the receivers won't also hear your sarcastic nonverbal tone.
- When relational conflict erupts online, it may be time to meet face-to-face rather than try to manage the conflict online.

Ask Group Members to Subdivide into Small Groups to Consider Potential Problems with the Suggested Solutions In large groups, not all members will be able to voice their objections and reservations. The U.S. Congress does most of its work in committees. Members of Congress realize that in order to hear and thoroughly evaluate bills

and resolutions, small groups of representatives must work together in committees. If you are working in a group too large for everyone to discuss the issues, suggest breaking into groups of two or three, with each group composing a list of objections to the proposals. The lists could be forwarded to the group secretary, who then could weed out duplicate objections and identify common points of contention. Even in a group of seven or eight, two subcommittees could evaluate the recommendations of the group. Group members should be able to participate frequently and evaluate the issues carefully. Individuals could also write down their objections to the proposed recommendations and then present them to the group.

One technique that may reduce groupthink is to have groups divide into two teams to debate an issue. The principle is simple: Develop a group structure that encourages critical thinking. Vigilant thinking fosters quality decisions.

Consider Using Technology to Help Your Group Gather and Evaluate Ideas One study found that having group members share and test ideas and evidence through the use of a computerized group decision support system (GDSS) rather than always meeting face to face may facilitate more extensive testing of ideas and opinions.⁸⁵ Some of the groups you participate in may not have access to such systems. Considerable research, however, suggests that the quality of group decisions can be enhanced if group members contribute ideas by using e-mail or other software programs to help gather and evaluate ideas.⁸⁶ Research also suggests, though, that being separated from other group members geographically can increase the likelihood of conflict.⁸⁷ One advantage to using GDSS methods in reducing groupthink is that ideas can be presented anonymously. Certain software programs let group members share ideas without revealing whether a member is the boss or the new intern. GDSS technology also helps separate the process of generating ideas from evaluating ideas.

Identifying and correcting groupthink should help improve the quality of your group's decisions by capitalizing on opposing viewpoints. A textbook summary of suggestions for dealing with groupthink may lead you to think that this problem can be corrected easily. It cannot. Because many people think that conflict should be avoided, they need specific guidelines for identifying and avoiding groupthink. In essence, be critical of ideas, not people. Remember that some controversy is useful. A decision-making group uses conflict to seek the best decision everyone can agree on—it seeks consensus. The last section of this chapter discusses managing conflict in the search for consensus.

REVIEW

► SUGGESTIONS FOR REDUCING GROUPTHINK

- Encourage critical, independent thinking.
- Be sensitive to status differences that may affect decision making.
- Invite someone from outside the group to evaluate the group's decision-making process.
- Assign a group member the role of devil's advocate.
- Ask group members to subdivide into small groups (or to work individually) to consider potential problems with suggested solutions.
- Use e-mail and other electronic technology to permit people to make anonymous contributions; this will reduce the effects of group member status differences.

Consensus: Reaching Agreement Through Communication

Some conflict is inevitable in groups, but this does not mean that all group discussions are doomed to end in disagreement. Conflict can be managed. **Consensus** occurs when all group members support and are committed to a decision. Even if a group does not reach consensus on key issues, it is not necessarily a failure. Good decisions can certainly emerge from groups whose members do not all completely agree on decisions. The U.S. Congress, for example, rarely achieves consensus; that does not mean, however, that its legislative process is ineffective.

Although conflict and controversy can improve the quality of group decision making, it is worthwhile to aim for consensus.⁸⁸ The following sections suggest some specific ways to help your group reach agreement.

The Nature of Consensus

Consensus should not come too quickly. If it does, your group is probably a victim of groupthink. Nor does consensus usually come easily. Sometimes group agreement is built on agreements on minor points raised during the discussion. To achieve consensus, group members should try to emphasize these areas of agreement. This can be a time-consuming process, and some members may lose patience before they reach agreement. Regardless of how long a group takes to reach consensus, consensus generally results from careful and thoughtful communication between members of the group.

Is taking the time to reach consensus worth the effort? Groups that reach consensus (not groupthink) and also effectively use good discussion methods, such as testing and challenging evidence and ideas, achieve a better quality decision.⁸⁹ Evidence also suggests that groups that achieve consensus are likely to maintain agreement even after several weeks.⁹⁰

To achieve consensus, some personal preferences must be surrendered for the overall well-being of the group. Group members must decide, both individually and collectively, whether they can achieve consensus. If two or three members refuse to change their minds on their positions, the rest of the group may decide that reaching consensus is not worth the extra time. Some group communication theorists suggest that groups might do better to postpone a decision if consensus cannot be reached, particularly if the group making the decision will also implement it. If several group members oppose the solution, they will be less eager to put it into practice. Ultimately, if consensus cannot be reached, a group should generally abide by the decision of the majority.

Suggestions for Reaching Consensus

Communication researchers agree that group members usually go through considerable effort before reaching consensus. Using specific communication strategies may help members more readily foster consensus in group and team meetings.⁹¹

We suggest you keep three key pieces of advice in mind when striving for group consensus.

1. Because groups have a tendency to get off track, help keep the group oriented toward its goal. Groups and teams often fail to reach agreement because they engage in discussion that is not relevant to the issue at hand—groups digress.
2. Be other-oriented and sensitive to the ideas and feelings of others. Listen without interrupting. Make an honest effort to set aside your own ideas and seek to understand the ideas of others.

3. Promote honest interaction and dialogue. Genuine consensus is more likely to occur if group and team members honestly express their thoughts and feelings; withholding ideas and suggestions may lead to groupthink.

How to Orient the Group Toward Its Goal The following strategies can help your group reach consensus by staying focused and on task.

- *Use metadiscussional phrases:* **Metadiscussion** is discussion about discussion. In other words, a metadiscussional statement focuses on the discussion process rather than on the topic under consideration.⁹² Metadiscussional statements include “Aren’t we getting a little off the subject?” or “John, we haven’t heard from you yet. What do you think?” or “Let’s summarize our areas of agreement.” These statements contain information and advice about the problem-solving process rather than about the issue at hand. Several studies show that groups whose members help orient the group toward its goal by (1) relying on facts rather than opinions, (2) making useful, constructive suggestions, and (3) trying to resolve conflict are more likely to reach agreement than groups whose members do not try to keep the group focused on its goal.⁹³

One of the essential task competencies identified in Chapter 1 is to maintain a focus on the group’s task. Metadiscussional phrases help to keep the group or team focused on the task or meeting agenda. This is an exceptionally powerful and useful skill to learn because you can offer metadiscussional statements even if you are not the designated leader of the group. Research clearly supports the importance of metadiscussion; simply having someone periodically reflect on where the group is on the agenda and review what has been accomplished can pay big dividends in helping the group stay on track and reach consensus.⁹⁴

- *Keep the focus on the group’s goal rather than on specific strategies to achieve the goal:* Focusing on shared interests and reminding the group what the goals are can help the group move on from debating only one or two strategies to achieving the goal. Group members sometimes fall in love with an idea or strategy and won’t let go of it. In order to move forward, explicitly and frequently remind the group of the overarching goal you are trying to achieve.
- *Display known facts for all group members to see:* Consider using a chalkboard, PowerPoint, or flipchart to display what is really known about the issues confronting the group. When group members cannot agree, they often retreat to restating opinions rather than advocating an idea based on hard evidence. If all group members can be reminded of what is known, consensus may be more easily obtained.

One way to display facts is to use the is/is not technique. Draw a line down the middle of the chalkboard or flip chart. On one side of the line, note what is known about the present issue. On the other side, identify what is unknown or is mere speculation. Separating facts from speculation can help group members focus on data rather than on unproven inferences.⁹⁵

- *Do not wait until the very end of the deliberations to suggest solutions:* Research suggests that groups that delay identifying specific solutions until the very end of the discussion are less likely to reach consensus than those groups that think about solutions earlier in the deliberations.⁹⁶ Of course, before jumping to solutions, groups need to analyze and assess the present situation.

How to Be Other-Oriented: Listen to the Ideas of Others What follows are tips and suggestions to help manage the relational tension that usually occurs when groups can’t reach consensus.

- *Give your idea to the group:* People often defend a solution or suggestion just because it is theirs. Here is a suggestion that may help you develop a more objective point of view: If you find yourself becoming defensive over an idea you suggest, assume that your idea has become the property of the group; it no longer belongs to you. Present your position as clearly as possible, then listen to other members' reactions and consider them carefully before you push for your point. Just because people disagree with your idea does not necessarily mean they respect you less.
- *Do not assume that someone must win and someone must lose:* When discussion becomes deadlocked, try not to view the discussion in terms of "us" versus "them" or "me" versus "the group." Try not to view communication as a game that someone wins and others lose. Be willing to compromise and modify your original position. Of course, if compromising means finding a solution that is marginally acceptable to everyone but does not really solve a problem, then seek a better solution.
- *Use group-oriented rather than self-oriented pronouns:* Harry likes to talk about the problem as *he* sees it. He often begins sentences with phrases such as "I think this is a good idea" or "My suggestion is to . . ." Studies suggest that groups that reach consensus generally use more pronouns like *we*, *us*, and *our*, while groups that do not reach consensus use more pronouns like *I*, *me*, *my*, and *mine*.⁹⁷ Using group-oriented words can foster cohesiveness.
- *Avoid opinionated statements that indicate a closed mind:* Communication scholars consistently find that opinionated statements and low tolerance for dissenting points of view inhibit agreement. This is especially apparent when the opinionated person is the discussion leader. A group with a less opinionated leader is more likely to reach agreement. Remember that using facts and relying on information obtained by direct observation are probably the best ways to avoid making opinionated statements.
- *Clarify misunderstandings:* Although not all disagreements arise because conflicting parties fail to understand one another, misunderstanding another's meaning sometimes creates conflict and adversely affects group consensus. Dealing with misunderstanding is simple. Ask a group member to explain a particular word or statement that you do not understand. Constantly solicit feedback from your listeners. During periods of disagreement, consider repeating the previous speaker's point and ask if you've got it right before you state your position on an issue. This procedure can become time-consuming and stilted if overused, but it can help when misunderstandings about meanings arise. It may also be helpful for you to remember that meanings are conveyed through people, not words. Stated another way, the meaning of a word comes from a person's unique perspective, perception, and experience.
- *Emphasize areas of agreement:* When the group gets bogged down in conflict and disagreement, it may prove useful to stop and identify the issues and information on which group members *do* agree. One study found that groups whose members were able to keep refocusing the group on areas of agreement, particularly following episodes of disagreement, were more likely to reach consensus than groups that continued to accentuate the negative.⁹⁸ Another study found that one of the most important ways of helping a group reach consensus is to be genuinely supportive of others.⁹⁹

How to Promote Honest Interaction and Dialogue To help groups and teams avoid a false consensus (groupthink) and to share ideas in a climate of openness and honesty, consider these suggestions.

- *Do not change your mind too quickly just to avoid conflict:* Although you may have to compromise to reach agreement, beware of changing your mind too quickly just to reach consensus. Groupthink occurs when group members do not test and challenge the ideas of others. When agreement seems to come too fast and too easily, be suspicious. Make certain that you have explored other alternatives and that everyone accepts the solution for basically the same reasons. Of course, you should not create conflict just for the sake of conflict, but do not be upset if disagreements arise. Reaching consensus takes time and often requires compromise. Be patient.
- *Avoid easy techniques that reduce conflict:* You may be tempted to flip a coin or to take a simple majority vote when you cannot resolve a disagreement. Resist that temptation, especially early in your deliberation. If possible, avoid making a decision until the entire group can agree. Of course, at times, a majority vote is the only way to resolve a conflict. Just be certain that the group explores other alternatives before it makes a hasty decision to avoid conflict. When time permits, gaining consensus through communication is best.
- *Seek out differences of opinion:* Remember that disagreements may improve the quality of a group's decision. With a variety of opinions and information, a group has a better chance of finding a good solution. Also remember that complex problems seldom have just one solution. Perhaps more than one of the suggestions offered will work. Actively recruit opposing viewpoints if everyone seems to be agreeing without much discussion.¹⁰⁰ Or, appoint someone to play the role of devil's advocate. Of course, do not belabor the point if you think that group members genuinely agree after considerable discussion.
- *Involve everyone in the discussion; frequently contribute to the group:* Again, the more varied the suggestions, solutions, and information, the greater the chance that a group will reach quality solutions and achieve consensus. Encourage less-talkative members to contribute to the group. Several studies suggest that members will be more satisfied with a solution if they have had an opportunity to express their opinions and to offer suggestions.¹⁰¹ Remember not to dominate the discussion. Good listening is important, too, and you may need to encourage others to speak out and assert themselves.
- *Use a variety of methods to reach agreement:* One researcher has found that groups are more likely to reach agreement if members try several approaches to resolve a deadlocked situation rather than using just one method of achieving consensus.¹⁰² Consider (1) combining two or more ideas into one solution; (2) building, changing, or extending existing ideas; (3) using effective persuasion skills to convince others to agree; and (4) developing new ideas to move the discussion forward rather than just rehashing old ideas.
- *Expand the number of ideas and alternatives:* One reason a group may not agree is because none of the ideas or solutions being discussed are good ones. Each solution on the table may have flaws. If that is the case, the task should change from trying to reach agreement on the alternatives in front of the group to generating more alternatives.¹⁰³ Switching from a debate to brainstorming may help pry group members away from a foolish adherence to existing solutions. Consider using one of the techniques discussed in Chapter 11 as a structured way to set more ideas on the table when the group seems stuck.

Are there differences between the ways face-to-face groups reach consensus and the ways virtual groups that interact online do? As we noted earlier in the chapter, one research study found that virtual groups use more negative conflict management behaviors.¹⁰⁴

Negative behaviors include taking a quick vote rather than discussing issues, suppressing differences of opinions, and assuming an "I-must-win-you-must-lose" approach to managing differences. Both online and in person, it's best to encourage honest conversation and dialogue and avoid squelching opposing viewpoints.

In summary, research suggests that groups that search for areas of agreement while critically testing ideas and reducing ambiguity are more likely to reach consensus than groups that don't do these things. Also, one research team found that groups that strive for unanimous agreement ultimately are more likely to at least reach consensus than groups that are seeking only minimal consensus.¹⁰⁵ As you strive for consensus, rather than just saying, "No, you're wrong," identify specific issues that need to be clarified. Groups that focus on disagreement about procedures rather than on substantive issues are less likely to reach consensus. Building consensus takes time and skill and is not necessarily the goal of the group, but if it can be achieved, consensus may result in a better quality decision.

REVIEW

► SUGGESTIONS FOR REACHING CONSENSUS

ORIENT THE GROUP TOWARD ITS GOAL

Effective Group Members

- Talk about the discussion process using metadiscussional phrases.
- Help keep the group focused on the goal.
- Display known facts for all members in the group to see.
- Suggest possible solutions throughout the group's deliberation.

Ineffective Group Members

- Do little to help clarify group discussion.
- Go off on tangents and do not stay focused on the agenda.
- Fail to provide summaries of issues or facts about which members agree or rely only on oral summaries.
- Wait until time is about to run out before suggesting solutions.

BE OTHER-ORIENTED: LISTEN TO THE IDEAS OF OTHERS

Effective Group Members

- Give their ideas to the group.
- Approach conflict as a problem to be solved rather than a win/lose situation.
- Use group-oriented pronouns to talk about the group.
- Avoid opinionated statements that are not based on facts or evidence.
- Clarify misunderstandings.
- Emphasize areas of agreement.

Ineffective Group Members

- Argue for an idea because it is their own.
- Assume that someone will win and someone will lose an argument.
- Talk about individual accomplishments rather than group accomplishments.
- Are closed-minded and inflexible.
- Do not clarify misunderstandings or check to see whether their message is understood.
- Ignore areas of agreement.

PROMOTE HONEST INTERACTION AND DIALOGUE

Effective Group Members

- Do not change their minds quickly just to avoid conflict.
- Avoid easy conflict-reducing techniques.
- Seek out differences of opinion.
- Try to involve everyone in the discussion and make frequent, meaningful contributions to the group.
- Use a variety of methods to reach agreement.
- Expand the number of ideas and alternatives using various techniques.

Ineffective Group Members

- Give in to the opinion of group members just to avoid conflict.
- Find easy ways to reduce the conflict, such as taking a quick vote without holding a discussion.
- Do not recruit a variety of viewpoints.
- Permit one person to monopolize the discussion or fail to draw out quiet group members.
- Use only one or two approaches to reach agreement.
- Seek a limited number of options or solutions.

STUDY GUIDE

PUTTING GROUP PRINCIPLES INTO PRACTICE

► SUMMARY OF PRINCIPLES

Conflict can have both positive and negative effects on a group. Conflict occurs because people are different and because they have their own ways of doing things. These differences affect the way people perceive and approach problem solving.

Collaborative Conflict-Management Principles

- Separate the people from the problem.
- Focus on shared interests.
- Generate many options to solve problems.
- Base decisions on objective criteria.

Groupthink

The absence of conflict or a false sense of agreement is called groupthink. It occurs when group members are reluctant to voice their feelings and objections to issues. To help reduce the likelihood of groupthink, review the following suggestions:

- If you are the group leader, encourage critical, independent thinking.
- Be sensitive to status differences that may affect decision making.
- Invite someone from outside the group to evaluate the group's decision making.
- Assign a group member the role of devil's advocate.
- Ask members to subdivide into small groups to consider potential problems and suggested solutions.

Consensus

Consider applying the following suggestions to help reach consensus and to help manage the conflicts and disagreements that arise in groups.

- Keep the group oriented toward its goal.
- Be other-oriented: Listen to the ideas of others.
- Promote honest interaction and dialogue.

► GROUP PRACTICE

Agree-Disagree Statements about Conflict

Read each statement once, and mark whether you agree (A) or disagree (D) with it. Take five or six minutes to do this.

1. _____ Most people find an argument interesting and exciting.
2. _____ In most conflicts someone must win and someone must lose. That's the way conflict is.
3. _____ The best way to handle a conflict is simply to let everyone cool off.
4. _____ Most people get upset with a person who disagrees with them.
5. _____ Most hidden agendas are probably best kept hidden to ensure a positive social climate.
6. _____ If people spend enough time together, they will find something to disagree about and will eventually become upset with one another.
7. _____ Conflicts can be solved if people just take the time to listen to one another.
8. _____ Conflict hinders a group's work.
9. _____ If you disagree with someone in a group, it is usually better to keep quiet than to get the group off track with your personal difference of opinion.
10. _____ When a group cannot reach a decision, members should abide by the decision of the group leader if he or she is qualified and competent.
11. _____ To compromise is to take the easy way out of conflict.
12. _____ Some people produce more conflict and tension than others. These people should be restricted from decision-making groups.

After you have marked the statements, break up into small groups and try to agree or disagree unanimously with each statement. Try in particular to find reasons for differences of opinion. If your group cannot reach a

unanimous opinion on a given statement, you may change the wording in the statement to promote consensus. Assign one group member to observe your group interactions. After your group has attempted to reach consensus, the observer should report how effectively the group used the guidelines suggested in this chapter.

Win as Much as You Can

This activity is designed to explore the effects of trust and conflict on communication.¹⁰⁶ You will be paired with a partner. There will be four partner teams working in a cluster.

Scoring

4 Xs: Lose \$1 each
3 Xs: Win \$1 each
1 Ys: Lose \$3
2 Xs: Win \$2 each
2 Ys: Lose \$2 each
1 Xs: Win \$3
3 Ys: Lose \$1 each
4 Ys: Win \$1 each

Directions: Your instructor will provide detailed instructions for playing this game. For ten successive rounds,

you and your partner will choose either an X or a Y. Your instructor will tell all partner teams to reveal their choices at the same time. Each round's payoff will depend on the decision made by others in your cluster. For example, according to the scoring chart, if all four partner teams choose X for round one of this game, each partner team loses \$1. You are to confer with your partner on each round to make a joint decision. Before rounds 5, 8, and 10, your instructor will permit you to confer with the other pairs in your cluster; in these three rounds, what you win or lose will be multiplied by either 3, 5, or 10. Keep track of your choices and winnings on the score sheet below. When you finish the game, compare your cluster's results with those of others. Discuss the factors that affected your balances. There are three rules:

- Do not confer with the other members of your cluster unless you are given specific permission to do so. This applies to nonverbal and verbal communication.
- Each pair must agree on a single choice for each round.
- Make sure that the other members of your cluster do not know your pair's choice until you are instructed to reveal it.

Round	Time Allowed	Confer With	Choice	\$ Won	\$ Lost	\$ Balance	
1	2 min.	Partner	_____	_____	_____	_____	
2	1 min.	Partner	_____	_____	_____	_____	
3	1 min.	Partner	_____	_____	_____	_____	
4	1 min.	Partner	_____	_____	_____	_____	
5	3 min.	Cluster					Bonus Round:
	1 min.	Partner	_____	_____	_____	_____	Pay × 3
6	1 min.	Partner	_____	_____	_____	_____	
7	1 min.	Partner	_____	_____	_____	_____	
8	3 min.	Cluster					
	1 min.	Partner	_____	_____	_____	_____	Pay × 5
9	1 min.	Partner	_____	_____	_____	_____	
10	3 min.	Cluster					
	1 min.	Partner	_____	_____	_____	_____	Pay × 10

► GROUP ASSESSMENT

Assessing Groupthink in Your Group

Complete the following groupthink assessment scale to determine whether a group you are part of avoids groupthink. For each statement, circle a number between 1 (if your group *never* does what the statement describes) and 10 (if your group *always* does what the statement describes). The higher your score, the better your group does in avoiding groupthink; a perfect score is 60.

1. Members of our group encourage and reward other group members for evaluating evidence and using good reasoning skills.
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
2. Members of our group periodically ask whether we are making accurate, high-quality decisions.
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
3. Members of our group sometimes admit they made a mistake or acknowledge that they reached an inaccurate conclusion.
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
4. Members of our group let other group members make up their minds without pressuring them to agree with what others think.
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
5. Members of our group periodically check to make sure that decisions the group has made continue to be supported by other group members.
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
6. Members of our group voice their honest opinions and do not just agree with what the group leader or dominant or most vocal group members suggest.
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Assessing Group Consensus Procedures

Groups need individual members who are skilled in helping the group reach consensus. Even if you are not the group leader you can have an important effect on helping a group reach agreement. Use the following assessment measure to take stock of your application of group consensus skills.

- 1 = Yes 2 = Sometimes Yes 3 = Uncertain
4 = Sometimes No 5 = No

1. I use metadiscussional statements (discussion about discussion) to help a group be more aware of its process and procedures.
1 2 3 4 5
2. I remind the group what the goal or objective is when the group seems lost or off track.
1 2 3 4 5
3. I offer solutions, suggestions, and proposals to help the group develop options.
1 2 3 4 5
4. I consistently use group-oriented pronouns (we, us, our) rather than individual-oriented pronouns (I, me) to develop a sense of collaboration.
1 2 3 4 5
5. I summarize, paraphrase, or help to clarify when the group members don't seem to understand one another.
1 2 3 4 5
6. I look for areas of agreement among group members and verbalize the agreement to the entire group.
1 2 3 4 5
7. I look for ways in which all group members can win and be successful rather than assuming someone must win and someone must lose.
1 2 3 4 5
8. I try to involve all group members in the conversation, especially when the group seems bogged down and disagreement is high.
1 2 3 4 5
9. I don't change my mind quickly just to avoid conflict, but I try to resolve issues when the group seems stuck.
1 2 3 4 5
10. I help expand the number of ideas and options, especially when the group can't reach agreement.
1 2 3 4 5