

# Conflict in the Small Group

# 11

After reading this chapter, you should be able to:

1. define conflict and identify its three dimensions,
2. differentiate among the four types of group conflict,
3. list and explain the five conflict-handling styles,
4. list five guidelines for handling conflict, and
5. pose five questions to answer when a group experiences conflict.

## Case Study

At 5:45 p.m., the members of Water Exercise Techniques (WET) are finishing their workout in the pool at the local community center. The members of WET include Sadie, the instructor who has led WET groups for 20 years; college professors Schlomo, Tandy, Jonetta, and Hector; Micah, who works as a systems analyst for a computer systems corporation; and Patsy, a nurse at County General. The group meets three times a week and has been swimming together for two years.

Sadie: (blows whistle) Okey-dokey, everyone, swim to the deep end. Tread water. Now, we need to start planning our end-of-the-semester party. Any ideas on where we should eat?

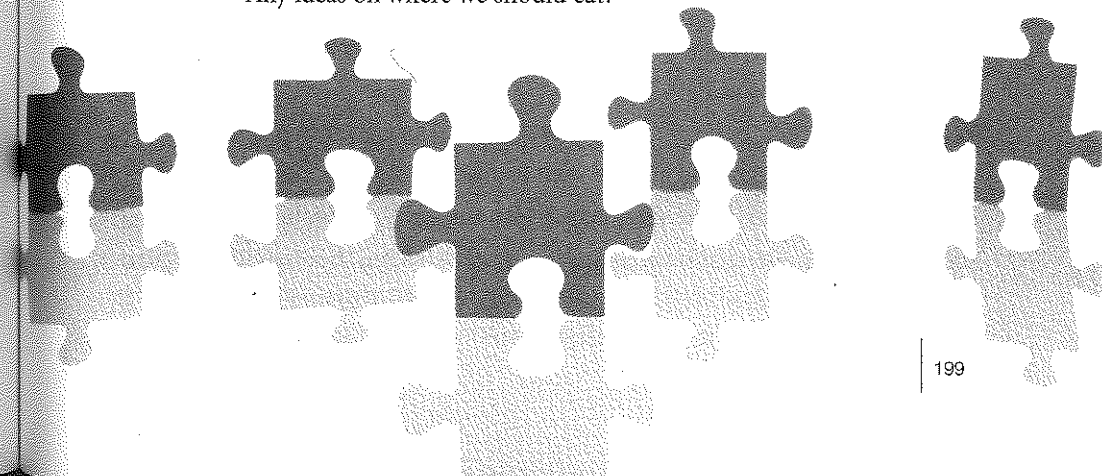


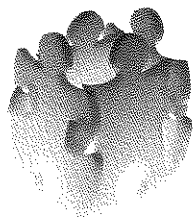


Photo 11.1 Even members of a social group, such as a swimming club, need to be reminded that conflict can surface in the most unexpected places.

Source: ©iStockphoto.com/elkor.

- Tandy: I think we should try Maxim's. We've never been there.
- Schlomo: I've been there, and it's like eating dinner in your grandmother's basement.
- Hector: So have I, although I wouldn't compare it to my grandmother's basement. I used to love exploring my grandmother's basement! She had the most interesting items she gathered from her travels all over the world. That reminds me, Sadie, aren't you and your husband heading off on another trip to Greece?
- Sadie: Yes, Bert and I are going to Greece in July. Remember that means there's no class for two weeks.
- Tandy: I won't be here, either. My husband and I are going to Alaska on a cruise.
- Hector: I thought you already went to Alaska.
- Tandy: We did—nine years ago. Really, Hector. You need to keep up.
- Schlomo: Speaking of keeping up, Tandy, we're talking about our dinner plans, not your travel plans. And we're treading water, not flutter kicking.
- Tandy: So should we try Maxim's then?

- Sadie: Switch to body pendulum. Are there any other ideas?
- Patsy: What about Pippi's? I liked the portabella mushroom sandwich I had there last year.
- Hector: Pippi's is too dark and too cold.
- Tandy: As I recall, Patsy, you ordered the mushroom sandwich because you thought it was a hamburger.
- Patsy: I still liked it. What about La Hacienda? I ate there a few years ago, and it was quite tasty.
- Tandy: La Hacienda closed last year. Don't you ever go downtown, Patsy?
- Patsy: What about Gilligan's? My daughter Libby works there, and she can reserve us a table.
- Tandy: We had our holiday party there, remember? Of course you don't—you didn't show up!
- Patsy: I didn't show up because it was snowing heavily. How many times do I have to tell you that? And it was Schlomo's idea to go to Gilligan's, not mine.
- Schlomo: Yes, it was.
- Tandy: It was hardly snowing. Besides, my salad was wilted.
- Patsy: What about the French Bistro?
- Tandy: That place is too casual. My husband refuses to go there.
- Patsy: Well, I'm not here to cause any trouble. Hector, Schlomo, Jonetta, feel free to make a suggestion.
- Sadie: Switch to body rotation. Micah, what do you think?
- Micah: Why get worked up over dinner? I'll go wherever the group wants to go.
- Schlomo: I will too. Since I chose Gilligan's last time, it's only fair that someone else gets to choose the restaurant this time.
- Jonetta: We're running out of choices, folks. Let's try to choose a restaurant that doesn't resemble a basement; isn't too dark, cold, or loud; doesn't have a relative working there; and is open. Considering these issues, everyone e-mail me a choice of two places. I'll compile a list and bring it to class next week, and we can go from there. Why ruin our friendships over a restaurant?
- Tandy: I still think we should go to Maxim's.
- Sadie: Switch to body vertical. We know, Tandy. You've made that very clear. But I think we'll follow Jonetta's suggestion, take a vote, and let the best restaurant win! Now, take a deep bite of air and go into a tuck float.



As illustrated in the case study, conflict can surface in the most unexpected places and involve the most mundane topics. Who among us hasn't engaged in conflict over where to eat dinner? Regardless of the place and topic, however, conflict, if left unresolved, can affect a small group's performance devastatingly. As researchers have discovered, unresolved or an excessive amount of conflict

causes a decrease in commitment to the group, group member satisfaction and interest, and overall group performance (Bishop & Scott, 1997; O'Connor, Gruenfeld, & McGrath, 1993; Wall & Nolan, 1986).

This chapter endeavors to examine conflict in the small group. To do so, we first will define conflict and identify the three dimensions of conflict. We then will explore the four types of conflict small group members experience and the five conflict-handling styles they use. Finally, we will offer five guidelines for handling conflict as it arises in the small group.

## Definition of Conflict

People often think of conflict in negative terms. Conflict experts William Wilmot and Joyce Hocker (2001) compiled a list of common images individuals liken to conflict. These images include conflict as a war, an explosion, a struggle, a mess, a trial, a heroic adventure, a balancing act, and a tide. Although these

images vary in intensity and personal involvement, they are similar in that group members must communicate with each other for conflict to occur (Folger, Poole, & Stutman, 2005).

As such, most experts not surprisingly believe conflict is an expressed

(i.e., verbally communicated) struggle among group members (Filley, 1975). Experts disagree, however, about what causes the struggle. Small group experts Victor Wall and Linda Nolan (1987) reported conflict routinely arises in groups due to the interdependence of group members. Communication scholars Janice Anderson, Myrna Foster-Kuehn, and Bruce McKinney (1996) posited conflict centers on the perception of incompatible goals, which influences group member interaction. In addition to incompatible goals, scarce resources and interference from group members affect group member interaction (Wilmot & Hocker, 2001).

? In your work group, what image would you liken to conflict? How does this image affect how you feel about work group conflict?

Small group experts Victor Wall, Gloria Galanes, and Sue Love (1987) believed conflict arises when group members attempt to reach consensus. Author Daniel Dana (2001) stated conflict occurs when group members assign fault to specific group members. Combining these various viewpoints, we define conflict as the process that occurs when group members, due to their interdependence, their real and perceived differences, and their emotions, engage in an expressed struggle that impedes task accomplishment.

Regardless of its definition, conflict comprises three dimensions—*affective*, *behavioral*, and *cognitive* (Barki & Hartwick, 2001, 2004)—to which group members respond. The *affective dimension* refers to the negative emotions group members associate with conflict. These emotions usually center on the anger and frustration that group members sometimes experience when engaged in a conflict with each other. Other negative emotions include jealousy, anxiety, and fear. The *behavioral dimension* refers to the behaviors group members use during conflict. Although these behaviors may vary, group members usually engage in some form of inappropriate behavior (e.g., yelling, shaking a fist, pounding a table) that interferes with conflict resolution. The *cognitive dimension* refers to the differences in opinion among group members. Most group members view conflict as some form of a disagreement, with a focus on the discrepancy among members' values, opinions, goals, or objectives.

Now that we have defined conflict and identified its three dimensions, let's examine the types of conflict often experienced in the small group.

## Types of Small Group Conflict

Conflict is almost always either constructive or destructive. Group members gain something as a result of a constructive conflict (Deutsch, 1973); these gains include, among others, pride, satisfaction, public acknowledgment of the group's task, and friendships established among group members. On the other hand, a destructive conflict causes group members to feel as if they lost something (Deutsch, 1973); these losses include, among others, embarrassment, dissatisfaction, public acknowledgement of the group's failures, and a lack of friendships established among group members.

Considering conflict constructive or destructive may depend on its type. Generally, four types of conflict emerge in the small group: substantive, affective, procedural, and inequity (see Table 11.1). At any point, a group can engage in more than one type of conflict (Nicotera, 1997).

The first type of conflict in the small group, *substantive conflict*, centers on group members' critical evaluation of ideas and can occur over a fact, an interpretation of a fact, a definition, or a choice (Verderber, 1982). Substantive

Table 11.1 Types of Conflict

Type	Definition
Substantive	Conflict centers on group members' critical evaluation of ideas.
Affective	Conflict centers on individual group members' communication and personality traits.
Procedural	Conflict centers on the procedures group members use to critically evaluate ideas or confront member behavior.
Inequity	Conflict centers on a group member's perceived imbalance between his contribution to the group and the contributions made by the group members.

conflict, also known as productive conflict (Witteman, 1991), is considered constructive and beneficial because how the conflict is handled ultimately affects the quality of the group's decision making or problem solving (Falk, 1982; Guetzkow & Cyr, 1954). When group members critically evaluate ideas, engage in idea generation, discuss group goals, are flexible in their behaviors and attitudes, and work toward a win-win outcome, the conflict becomes more productive (Witteman, 1991).

The second type of conflict in the small group, *affective conflict*, centers on individual group members' communication and personality traits. In many cases, affective conflict is disruptive, creates frustration, and reduces task quality (Falk, 1982; Guetzkow & Cyr, 1954) because the focus on a group member's communication or personality traits overshadows the group task. When decision making rests in the hands of one group member, or if group members consistently disagree, affective conflict likely will occur (Witteman, 1991). In the case study, the disagreement over where to hold their end-of-the-semester dinner party causes the WET members to focus on member traits or behaviors. For example, Tandy engages in affective conflict when she attacks Hector for his faulty memory and Patsy for her absence at the holiday dinner.

The third type of conflict in the small group, *procedural conflict*, often stems from substantive or affective conflict (Putnam, 1986). Procedural conflict centers on the procedures group members use to critically evaluate ideas or confront member behavior. For some groups, procedural conflict is tied to a disagreement about how to work on a task (Nicotera, 1997). In the case study, Jonetta attempts to resolve the group's procedural conflict by suggesting the group members e-mail her their choice of restaurants, and Sadie attempts to resolve it by announcing a vote will be taken at the next group meeting.

The fourth type of conflict in the small group, *inequity conflict*, centers on a group member's perceived imbalance between his contribution to the group and

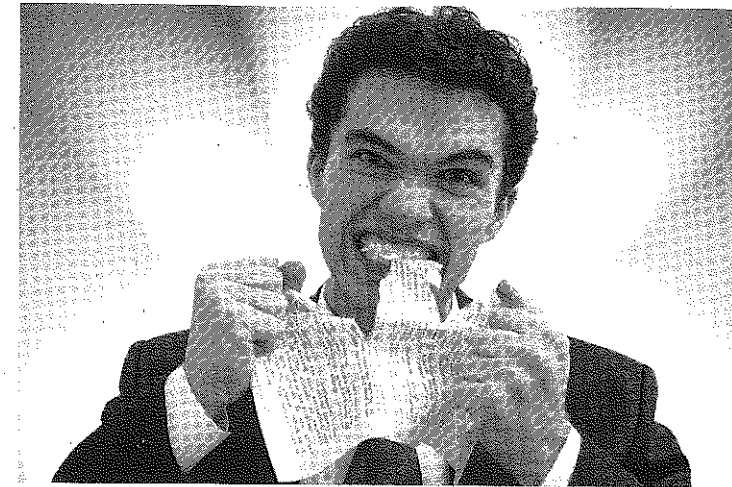


Photo 11.2 Substantive, affective, procedural, or inequity conflict easily can make a group member feel frustrated or annoyed.

Source: ©iStockphoto.com/Cimmerian.

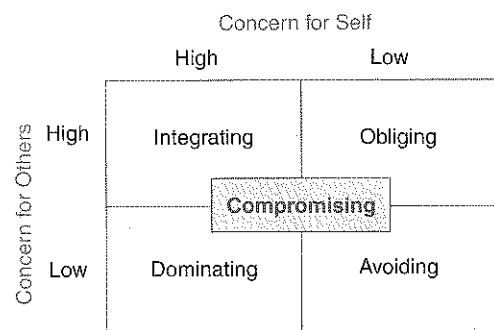
the contributions made by the group members. A group member who experiences inequity often feels less satisfied and perceives a greater amount of conflict occurring in the group (Wall & Nolan, 1987). Greater inequity also is associated with conflict centered on a group member rather than on the task (Wall & Nolan, 1986). In the case study, Patsy experiences inequity conflict when she finally asks Hector, Schlomo, and Jonetta to suggest a restaurant.

Now that we have examined the types of conflict experienced in the small group, let's examine the five conflict-handling styles used by group members.

## Conflict-Handling Styles

Adapted from the work of Robert Blake and Jane Mouton (1964) and influenced by the work of Kenneth Thomas and Ralph Kilmann (1974), conflict expert M. Afzalur Rahim (1983, 2002; Rahim & Bonoma, 1979) developed a taxonomy of five conflict-handling styles. Central to understanding this taxonomy is the notion that when group members handle conflict, they consider two factors: their concern for themselves (i.e., their own needs) and their concern for others (i.e., the needs of their group members). Based on the levels (i.e., high, moderate, low) of these two concerns, five categories of conflict-handling styles emerge (see Figure 11.1): avoiding, dominating, compromising, obliging, and integrating (Rahim, 1983).

Figure 11.1 Model of Conflict-Handling Styles



Source: From Rahim, M. A. (1983). A measure of styles of handling interpersonal conflict. *Academy of Management Journal*, 26, 368–376. Copyright © Academy of Management. Reprinted with permission.

### Avoiding Conflict-Handling Style

A group member who uses an avoiding conflict-handling style has a low concern for both the self and the group members (Rahim, 2002). This means a group member may appear uninterested in the conflict, in part because he views conflict as hopeless, useless, or punishing (Filley, 1975), or in part because he views the issues surrounding the conflict as trivial (Rahim & Bonoma, 1979). Consequently, an avoider psychologically—and, if possible, physically—will leave the conflict situation. An avoider will not openly take sides in group conflict (Filley, 1975) and often does not disclose his feelings or thoughts about the conflict issue (Folger et al., 2005). In some instances, an avoider may appear apathetic, which may or may not be an accurate perception made by group members. In the case study, Micah illustrates the avoiding style when he informs the group he will abide by whatever decision the group makes about the restaurant. In fact, if Sadie hadn't asked Micah a question, he wouldn't have participated in the discussion at all! Luckily, group members infrequently use this conflict-handling style (Farmer & Roth, 1998).

### Dominating Conflict-Handling Style

A group member who uses a dominating conflict-handling style places a priority on satisfying her own concerns instead of satisfying the concerns of group members (Rahim, 1983). This style represents a “win-lose” mentality in that the group member views winning as the ultimate goal (Rahim, Buntzman, & White, 1999) and often ignores the expectations or needs of her group

members (Rahim, 2002). Because winning gives a dominator a sense of exhilaration and excitement (Filley, 1975), she may hide her true motives and withhold information that would weaken her position (Folger et al., 2005). In the case study, Tandy uses the dominating style by finding fault with each restaurant suggestion Patsy makes. At the end of the interaction, Tandy reiterates the group should eat at Maxim's, which further demonstrates her assertiveness and lack of cooperativeness.

**“Ethically Speaking:** In a work group, under what circumstances is using an avoiding or a dominating conflict-handling style an appropriate behavior? Why?”

### Compromising Conflict-Handling Style

A group member who uses a compromising conflict-handling style agrees to be agreeable (Blake & Mouton, 1970) and strives to find a middle ground between satisfying his own needs and satisfying his group members' needs (Rahim et al., 1999). A group member using the compromising style, therefore, will alternate between satisfying his own needs and satisfying the needs of group members. Although this member may make other group members aware of his will to compromise, he may not explain his reasons for the compromise (Folger et al., 2005). In the case study, Schlomo compromises when he tells the group he will go to whatever restaurant the group chooses since the group went to Gilligan's (his choice) the previous semester. Use this conflict-handling style as a last resort, however, because its use forces one group member—as evidenced by Schlomo—to give up something (Nicotera, 1997).

### Obliging Conflict-Handling Style

A group member who uses an obliging conflict-handling style concerns herself highly with the needs of her group members (Rahim, 1983) and emphasizes finding commonalities among members (Rahim, 2002). A member who uses the obliging style tends to be highly flexible (Folger et al., 2005), in part because she overvalues the maintenance of group member relationships (Filley, 1975), in part because she may consider herself to have lower status than the other members (Rahim, 1983), and in part to maximize group harmony (Blake & Mouton, 1970). At the same time, a member who uses the obliging style desires the other members' acceptance and does not like to be confrontational because she fears hurting another member's feelings (Filley, 1975). In the case study, Patsy exemplifies the obliging style when she suggests a variety of restaurants from which the group could choose. Her use of this style becomes even more apparent when she continues to offer suggestions, even though Tandy responds in a disconfirming manner.



## Integrating Conflict-Handling Style

A group member who uses an integrating conflict-handling style works toward developing a solution that satisfies the needs of all members (Ruble & Thomas, 1976). This group member does not view satisfying group members' needs and satisfying his own needs as mutually exclusive; rather, this member attempts to simultaneously satisfy his own needs and the needs of his group members. Considering conflict natural and helpful and refusing to sacrifice the needs of other members for the good of the group (Filley, 1975), this member engages in behaviors that stress openness, examination of differences, and a candid exchange of logic and emotion (Blake & Mouton, 1970; Rahim, 2002). In the case study, Jonetta illustrates the integrating style when she combines the concerns raised by the group and suggests how the group could arrive at a mutually desirable solution.

Not surprisingly, the integrating style is the preferred conflict-handling style among group members because using this style produces higher-quality outcomes (Wall et al., 1987), members regard it as the most effective style when it comes to decision making or problem solving (Kuhn & Poole, 2000), and it relates positively to group member satisfaction (Wall & Galanes, 1986). In addition, small group members frequently use this conflict-handling style (Farmer & Roth, 1998), which is considered the most appropriate and effective conflict-handling style (Gross & Guerrero, 2000).

Complete the ROCI-II instrument (Rahim, 1983). This instrument gives you a good indication of the conflict-handling style you are most likely to use in a group. Consider, however, that although the choice of a conflict-handling style usually is habitual (Folger et al., 2005), it can be situational (Nicotera, 1997), particularly if the group member considers the issue of conflict important or if the circumstance dictates the use of a particular style (Callahan, Benzing, & Perri, 2006). Rahim (2002) identified several situations in which each conflict-handling style is considered appropriate to use (see Table 11.2). As you read these situations, consider whether you would use the identified style to handle the conflict or if you would use a combination of styles. Researchers have found the use of a combination of conflict-handling styles (i.e., using the integrating, obliging, and compromising styles or the integrating and compromising styles simultaneously) can be more effective than relying on the use of a single style (Munduate, Ganaza, Peiro, & Euwema, 1999; Weider-Hatfield & Hatfield, 1995). As such, it might prove prudent to assess the conflict situation and consider using another style or a combination of styles when appropriate.

Now that we have examined the five conflict-handling styles used by small group members, let's explore some guidelines for handling conflict in small groups.

What is your conflict-handling style? How does this style help your work group? How does this style hinder your work group?

## Assessment Tool 11.1 Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory-II

This questionnaire contains statements about your communicative behaviors in a conflict situation with your group members. Indicate how often each statement is true for you personally according to the following scale.

If the statement is **almost always true**, write 5 in the blank.

If the statement is **often true**, write 4 in the blank.

If the statement is **occasionally true**, write 3 in the blank.

If the statement is **rarely true**, write 2 in the blank.

If the statement is **almost never true**, write 1 in the blank.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. I try to investigate an issue with my group members to find a solution acceptable to us.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. I attempt to avoid being "put on the spot" and try to keep my conflict with my group members to myself.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. I use my influence to get my ideas accepted.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. I generally try to satisfy the needs of my group members.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. I try to find a middle course to resolve an impasse my group has reached.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. I try to integrate my ideas with those of my group members to come up with a decision jointly.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. I usually avoid open discussion of my differences with my group members.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. I use my authority to get my ideas accepted.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. I usually accommodate the wishes of my group members.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. I usually propose a middle ground for breaking deadlocks.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 11. I try to work with my group members to find solutions to a problem that satisfy all our expectations.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 12. I try to stay away from disagreeing with my group members.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 13. I use my expertise to help my group members make a decision in my favor.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 14. I give in to the wishes of my group members.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 15. I negotiate with my group members so we can reach a compromise.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 16. I exchange accurate information with my group members so we can solve a problem together.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 17. I avoid any unpleasant exchanges with my group members.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 18. I am usually firm in pursuing my side of an issue.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 19. I usually concede to my group members.

(Continued)

(Continued)

- \_\_\_\_\_ 20. I "give and take" so a compromise can be made.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 21. I try to bring all our concerns out in the open so that the issues can be resolved in the best possible way.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 22. I try to keep any disagreement with my group members to myself in order to avoid hard feelings.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 23. I sometimes use my power to win a competitive situation.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 24. I often go along with the suggestions of my group members.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 25. I collaborate with my group members to come up with decisions acceptable to us.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 26. I try to satisfy the expectations of my group members.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 27. I try to work with my group members to develop a proper understanding of the task.

**Scoring:**

1. Add your scores for items 1, 6, 11, 16, 21, 25, and 27. Divide by 7. This is your **collaborating** conflict-handling score.
2. Add your scores for items 2, 7, 12, 17, and 22. Divide by 5. This is your **avoiding** conflict-handling score.
3. Add your scores for items 3, 8, 13, 18, and 23. Divide by 5. This is your **competing** conflict-handling score.
4. Add your scores for items 4, 9, 14, 19, 24, and 26. Divide by 6. This is your **accommodating** conflict-handling score.
5. Add your scores for items 5, 10, 15, and 20. Divide by 4. This is your **compromising** conflict-handling score.

Source: From Rahim, M. A. (1983). A measure of styles of handling interpersonal conflict. *Academy of Management Journal*, 26, 368–376. Copyright © Academy of Management. Reprinted with permission.

## Guidelines for Handling Conflict

Victor Wall and Linda Nolan (1986) found that in a survey of 375 groups, 75% reported the presence of conflict. Based on this statistic, group members should expect to handle conflict at some point during the group's history. Any time a conflict arises, group members should consider the following five guidelines.

1. Group conflict sometimes causes decreased affect for the group. When groups experience little conflict, members report more positive feelings about

Table 11.2 Appropriate Situations for Conflict-Handling Styles

Style	Appropriate Situation
Avoiding	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The issue is trivial.</li> <li>2. Group members need to take a break.</li> <li>3. Confronting group members is unnecessary.</li> </ol>
Dominating	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The issue is trivial.</li> <li>2. A timely decision is needed.</li> <li>3. The group members lack expertise.</li> </ol>
Compromising	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The group members can't reach consensus.</li> <li>2. The dominating style has no effect.</li> <li>3. A temporary solution is needed.</li> </ol>
Obliging	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The issue is more important to group members than you.</li> <li>2. The relationship among group members is worth preserving.</li> <li>3. You lack expertise.</li> </ol>
Integrating	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The issue is complex.</li> <li>2. The group has the necessary resources.</li> <li>3. The issue requires group member collaboration.</li> </ol>

Source: Reprinted by permission of Emerald Group Publishing Ltd. from Rahim, M. A. (2002). Toward a theory of managing organizational conflict. *International Journal of Conflict Management*, 13(3), 206–235.

each other than groups that report moderate or high amounts of conflict (O'Connor et al., 1993). According to Susan Jarboe and Hal Witteman (1996), the presence of substantive, affective, and procedural conflict can result in the development of negative feelings for the group. Individuals are less likely to quit a group when affective conflict is low (Bayazit & Mannix, 2003).

2. Group conflict may have nothing to do with the task. In fact, conflict can occur over such issues as struggles for leadership, perceived unequal workloads, group member personality differences, procedural issues, differences in group goals, and differences in ideology (Sell, Lovaglia, Mannix, Samuelson, & Wilson, 2004; Wall & Nolan, 1986). Kenneth Thomas and Warren Schmidt (1976) reported that conflict most often stems from misunderstandings among group members, which they consider a communication failure. Communication professor Sue Pendell (1990) offered that at times conflict arises when group members engage in



Identify the last time you engaged in a deviant behavior in your work group. Did conflict occur as a result of your behavior? If so, how was the conflict handled?

deviant behaviors. Similar to the notion of deviant role behaviors discussed in Chapter 8, deviant behaviors enacted by group members violate group norms (Putnam, 1986). Examples of deviant behaviors include not participating in group discussion, missing group meet-

ings, fighting for leadership, “testing” members’ opinions, and forming coalitions (Pendell, 1990). Group members who engage in these deviant behaviors unwittingly may cause conflict to occur.

3. Group conflict may prove irresolvable. As much as members would like to resolve group conflict, sometimes they simply cannot. In some cases, breakdowns in communication between and among group members create a rift that cannot be repaired (Thomas, 1976). In other cases, we belong to groups in which no amount of interaction can change a difficult member’s lack of willingness to resolve conflict. In still other cases, a group member’s communication and personality traits may influence whether conflict can be resolved. Communication scholars Randall Rogan and Betty La France (2003) reported that verbally aggressive individuals are more likely to approach a conflict situation in a controlling manner and are less likely to approach a conflict situation in a nonconfrontational manner. Scholars Robert Jones and Charles White (1985) found that high Machs prefer to approach conflict in a forcing or confrontational manner rather than in an obliging manner. In these cases, rather than wasting time, energy, and group resources in trying to resolve conflict, group members should recognize that some conflict is irresolvable and focus their energy elsewhere.

4. Group conflict has both short- and long-term benefits (Thomas, 1990). In the short term, the benefits of conflict include coping with the immediate issue and arriving at a decision or solution that satisfies the group members; in the long term, the benefits of conflict include establishing norms and procedures for group members to consider in conflict situations and influencing the development of group culture and member identification.

5. Group conflict produces both short- and long-term consequences (Thomas, 1976). In addition to benefiting a group, the consequences of group conflict can affect how group members communicate with each other, how they feel about each other, and whether they feel motivated to handle conflict. These consequences subsequently may act as a moderator between group conflict and group performance, which can become detrimental over the life span of a group.

## A Final Note About Small Group Conflict

As we conclude this chapter, we want to reiterate that conflict creates both constructive and destructive consequences. As stated by conflict expert Linda Putnam (1986), “conflict typically evokes high levels of interpersonal anxiety and yet it aids in making top quality decisions” (p. 194). After experiencing constructive conflict, group members feel a sense of energy and a greater connection to the group, develop a greater sense of self-worth, and learn how to act in a productive manner; after experiencing destructive conflict, group members avoid each other, engage in less direct interaction, and harbor resentment and disappointment (Hocker & Wilmot, 1991). To make conflict as constructive as possible, group members should reflect on not only how they define the conflict but how best to handle it as well. Doing so allows group members to reduce both the frequency and the intensity of any conflict situation.

## Conclusion

This chapter examined conflict in the small group. To do so, we first defined conflict and identified its three dimensions. We then explored the types of conflict experienced by small group members and examined the five conflict-handling styles used by group members. Finally, we offered five guidelines for handling conflict as it arises in the small group. As you read the next chapter, consider how your group members’ conflict-handling styles impact the establishment of your group’s communication climate.

## Discussion Questions

1. Refer to a recent conflict that occurred in one of the groups to which you belong. How did you respond affectively, behaviorally, and cognitively?
2. Using a primary group to which you belong, identify an example of a substantive, an affective, a procedural, and an inequity conflict experienced by the group. Of these four types of conflict, which type(s) would you consider constructive? Which type(s) would you consider destructive?
3. Identify the advantages and disadvantages of using each conflict-handling style in your work group. Which style has the most advantages? Which style has the most disadvantages? To what extent are the advantages and disadvantages you identified unique to your work group?



4. What are some deviant group member behaviors that could cause conflict in a virtual group? Would these behaviors be considered deviant if the group met face-to-face?
5. What are some additional short- and long-term benefits of group conflict?

## References

- Anderson, J. W., Foster-Kuehn, M., & McKinney, B. C. (1996). *Communication skills for surviving conflicts at work*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- Barki, H., & Hartwick, J. (2001). Interpersonal conflict and its management in information system development. *MIS Quarterly*, 25, 195–228.
- Barki, H., & Hartwick, J. (2004). Conceptualizing the construct of interpersonal conflict. *International Journal of Conflict Management*, 15, 216–224.
- Bayazit, M., & Mannix, E. A. (2003). Should I stay or should I go? Predicting team members' intent to remain in the team. *Small Group Research*, 34, 290–321.
- Bishop, J. W., & Scott, K. D. (1997, February). How commitment affects team performance. *HR Magazine*, 42(2), 107–111.
- Blake, R. R., & Mouton, J. S. (1964). *The managerial grid*. Houston, TX: Gulf.
- Blake, R. R., & Mouton, J. S. (1970). The fifth achievement. *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 6, 413–426.
- Callahan, G. A., Benzing, C. D., & Perri, D. F. (2006). Choice of conflict-handling strategy: A matter of context. *Journal of Psychology*, 140, 269–288.
- Dana, D. (2001). *Conflict resolution: Mediation tools for everyday worklife*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Deutsch, M. (1973). *The resolution of conflict: Constructive and destructive processes*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Falk, G. (1982). An empirical study measuring conflict in problem-solving groups which are assigned different decision rules. *Human Relations*, 35, 1123–1138.
- Farmer, S. M., & Roth, J. (1998). Conflict-handling behavior in work groups: Effects of group structure, decision processes, and time. *Small Group Research*, 29, 669–713.
- Filley, A. C. (1975). *Interpersonal conflict resolution*. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman & Co.
- Folger, J. P., Poole, M. S., & Stutman, R. K. (2005). *Working through conflict: Strategies for relationships, groups, and organizations* (5th ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Gross, M. A., & Guerrero, L. K. (2000). Managing conflict appropriately and effectively: An application of the competence model to Rahim's organizational conflict styles. *International Journal of Conflict Management*, 11, 200–226.
- Guetzkow, H., & Cyr, J. (1954). An analysis of conflict in decision-making groups. *Human Relations*, 7, 367–382.
- Hocker, J. L., & Wilmot, W. W. (1991). *Interpersonal conflict* (3rd ed.). Dubuque, IA: Wm. C. Brown.
- Jarboe, S. C., & Wittenman, H. R. (1996). Intragroup conflict management in task-oriented groups: The influence of problem sources and problem analyses. *Small Group Research*, 27, 316–338.
- Jones, R. E., & White, C. S. (1985). Relationships among personality, conflict resolution styles, and task effectiveness. *Group & Organization Studies*, 10, 152–167.
- Kuhn, T., & Poole, M. S. (2000). Do conflict management styles affect group decision-making? Evidence from a longitudinal field study. *Human Communication Research*, 26, 558–590.
- Munduate, L., Ganaza, J., Peiro, J. M., & Euwema, M. (1999). Patterns of styles in conflict management and effectiveness. *International Journal of Conflict Management*, 10, 5–24.
- Nicotera, A. M. (1997). Managing conflict communication in groups. In L. R. Frey & J. K. Barge (Eds.), *Managing group life: Communicating in decision-making groups* (pp. 104–130). Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- O'Connor, K. M., Gruenfeld, D. H., & McGrath, J. E. (1993). The experience and effects of conflict in continuing work groups. *Small Group Research*, 24, 363–382.
- Pendell, S. D. (1990). Deviance and conflict in small group decision making: An exploratory study. *Small Group Research*, 21, 393–403.
- Putnam, L. L. (1986). Conflict in group decision-making. In R. Y. Hirokawa & M. S. Poole (Eds.), *Communication and group decision-making* (pp. 175–196). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Rahim, M. A. (1983). A measure of styles of handling interpersonal conflict. *Academy of Management Journal*, 26, 368–376.
- Rahim, M. A. (2002). Toward a theory of managing organizational conflict. *International Journal of Conflict Management*, 13, 206–235.
- Rahim, M. A., & Bonoma, T. V. (1979). Managing organizational conflict: A model for diagnosis and intervention. *Psychological Reports*, 44, 1323–1344.
- Rahim, M. A., Buntzman, G. F., & White, D. (1999). An empirical study of the stages of moral development and conflict management styles. *International Journal of Conflict Management*, 10, 154–171.
- Rogan, R. G., & La France, B. H. (2003). An examination of the relationship between verbal aggressiveness, conflict management strategies and conflict interaction goals. *Communication Quarterly*, 51, 458–469.
- Ruble, T. L., & Thomas, K. W. (1976). Support for a two-dimensional model of conflict behavior. *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance*, 16, 143–155.
- Sell, J., Lovaglia, M. J., Mannix, E. A., Samuelson, C. D., & Wilson, R. K. (2004). Investigating conflict, power, and status within and among groups. *Small Group Research*, 35, 44–72.
- Thomas, K. W. (1976). Conflict and conflict management. In M. D. Dunnette (Ed.), *Handbook of industrial and organizational psychology* (pp. 889–935). Chicago: Rand McNally.
- Thomas, K. W. (1990). Conflict and negotiation processes in organizations. In M. D. Dunnette & L. M. Hough (Eds.), *Handbook of industrial and organizational psychology* (Vol. 3, 2nd ed., pp. 651–717). Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychologists Press.
- Thomas, K. W., & Kilmann, R. H. (1974). *The Thomas-Kilmann conflict MODE instrument*. Tuxedo Park, NY: Xicom.
- Thomas, K. W., & Schmidt, W. H. (1976). A survey of managerial interests with respect to conflict. *Academy of Management Journal*, 19, 315–318.
- Verderber, R. F. (1982). *Working together: Fundamentals of group decision making*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Wall, V. D., Jr., & Galanes, G. J. (1986). The SYMLOG dimensions and small group conflict. *Central States Speech Journal*, 37, 61–78.
- Wall, V. D., Jr., Galanes, G. J., & Love, S. B. (1987). Small, task-oriented groups: Conflict, conflict management, satisfaction, and decision quality. *Small Group Behavior*, 18, 31–55.
- Wall, V. D., Jr., & Nolan, L. L. (1986). Perceptions of inequity, satisfaction, and conflict in task-oriented groups. *Human Relations*, 39, 1033–1052.
- Wall, V. D., Jr., & Nolan, L. L. (1987). Small group conflict: A look at equity, satisfaction, and styles of conflict management. *Small Group Behavior*, 18, 188–211.
- Weider-Hatfield, D., & Hatfield, J. D. (1995). Relationships among conflict, management styles, levels of conflict, and reactions to work. *Journal of Social Psychology*, 135, 687–698.
- Wilmot, W. W., & Hocker, J. L. (2001). *Interpersonal conflict* (6th ed.). Boston: McGraw-Hill.
- Wittenman, H. (1991). Group member satisfaction: A conflict-related account. *Small Group Research*, 22, 24–58.