



COLLABORATIVE CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Collaborative conflict resolution can change a dispute originally perceived as win-lose to one that is perceived as win-win. Before discussing a specific collaborative conflict resolution method that we can use in various conflict situations, we'll review collaborative conflict resolution as it relates to communication competence.

Collaboration and Communication Competence

Collaboration requires the motivation to engage in this somewhat difficult win-win approach to conflict, knowledge about collaboration, and communication skills that are used in an effective and appropriate manner. Our motivation to engage in collaborative

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win-win conflict resolution rests on the assumption that its use will be rewarding for ourselves and our partners. Our knowledge of collaboration involves understanding that differences in beliefs, attitudes, and preferences may not necessarily be in conflict. In other words, collaboration assumes that perceived polar opposites may be compatible. As previously mentioned, collaborative win-win conflict resolution requires using many of the communication skills in

this book. Table 11.3, "Collaborative Conflict Resolution Skills," shows these skills and their use in collaborative win-win conflict resolution.

A Collaborative Conflict Resolution Method

The following collaborative conflict resolution method has four steps that concern people, interests, options, and criteria. Specifically, the four steps entail separating people from the problem ("People"), focusing on interests, not positions ("Interests"), generating a variety of possibilities before deciding what to do ("Options"), and insisting that the results be based on some objective standard ("Criteria").¹⁰

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Separate the People from the Problem (People) It is important to "attack a problem" rather than "attack a person" in collaborative conflict resolution. We should perceive a conflict as an opportunity for joint decision making and problem solving and strive to protect our relationship with our partner. To remind ourselves of our collaborative orientation and to reassure our partner that we don't view her or him as "the enemy," we can tell our partner:

- "Working together will allow us to solve this problem in the best way possible."
- "We can work this out even though we've never had to deal with this problem before."
- "I'm sure that we can cooperate and eventually develop a solution that will benefit both of us."

TABLE 11.3 Collaborative Conflict Resolution Skills

| Skill | Characterization | Example |
|---|--|---|
| Metacommunication | Communication about communication (content level of meaning) and relationships (relational level of meaning) | "Let's brainstorm possible ways to meet both your goals and my goals without evaluating the suggestions at this point." |
| Perception checking | A description of sense data, an interpretation (perception) of the sense data, and a request for feedback | "I see that you're not smiling and not talking much. Maybe you don't believe this collaborative approach will work, or maybe you find it hard to generate options. Is it one of these?" |
| Face-saving skills | Overlooking a face-threatening act; using humor; offering an apology; communicating an explanation; engaging in physical remediation | "I'm sorry I yelled a while back; I shouldn't have lost my temper." |
| Nondefensive responses to criticism | Validate a critic's thoughts and feelings even if we disagree with the criticism; e.g., asking open-ended questions; guessing about specifics; agreeing with the truth; agreeing to disagree | "I see how you might think that I only want to win this argument; however, that's not the case. I just want my needs taken seriously." |
| Expressing emotions | Accept responsibility and own feelings by combining emotion words with a description of sense data | "I get angry when you tell me that I'm 'wrong.'" |
| Language clarity skills | Owning thoughts, indexing, and dating information | "In my opinion, we can achieve your goals without having to move." |
| Nonverbal immediacy skills | Function to enhance liking, closeness, approachability, and positive evaluations (e.g., smiling, nodding, making eye contact, forward leaning and direct body orientation, variety in pitch, patting a shoulder, immediate conversational responses) | Individuals in conflict will refrain from engaging in the following behaviors: frowning, avoiding eye contact, using adaptors, leaning backwards, sounding aggressive or submissive, applying force when touching, and using silence in conversation. |
| Skills of effective conversationalists | Asking questions, responding to and providing free information, crediting sources, maintaining conversational coherence, engaging in appropriate turn taking, summarizing the main ideas | "Your comment just reminded me of something that may help us resolve this conflict. Have you finished what you want to say? I'd like to tell about my thoughts." |
| Active listening and confirming responses | Prompting and questioning, reassuring and expressing concern, analyzing and advising, judging (offering constructive criticism), paraphrasing thoughts and feelings | "Let me see if I understand you correctly: you feel frustrated because you want to eliminate clutter in the house but don't want to get rid of any possessions. Am I right?" |

(Continued)

TABLE 11.3 Continued

| Skill | Characterization | Example |
|---------------------------------|--|--|
| Assertiveness skills | Standing up for our beliefs, rights, and needs while respecting the beliefs, rights, and needs of others, e.g., owning thoughts and feelings; using meta-communication; expressing empathic assertion; using "the broken record"; and boundary-setting responses to the communication of prejudice | "I know that you've had a rough day and that you're tired and angry, but I don't want you to take it out on me. I'll talk to you when you stop yelling at me." |
| Relationship maintenance skills | For example, positivity (being cheerful, avoiding criticism, expressing appreciation) | "I think we can solve this problem together. I appreciate you for working with me." |

Focus on Interests, not Positions (Interests) "Positions" are conclusions that we believe we need to defend and are specific solutions to interests. "Interests" are reasons that underlie positions and are varied and diffuse. One way to view positions and interests is to assume that a position is "just one solution" and interests are "the reasons why we have come to a specific solution." Arguing about positions or specific solutions can endanger relationships because individuals engaged in conflict may find themselves in a contest of

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wills. On the other hand, focusing on the interests or the reasons that underlie solutions can result in creative options that enable both parties in conflict to achieve their goals. For example, when we return to the conflict situation about moving to a new house, we can see that wanting to move to a larger home is a position, or "just one solution." We may therefore feel compelled to defend our one position or solution. Similarly, our partner may believe that she or he must defend the position of wanting to stay put. However, if part-

ners focus on interests, or the reasons why they have come to a specific solution, they may find that they both can reach their goals.

In this stage of the collaborative conflict resolution method, we can ask our partner:

- "Why do you want to . . . (*buy a new car*); believe that . . . (*we should punish our child*); hope that . . . (*we'll get married soon*)?"
- What is it that you are trying to achieve by wanting to . . . (*change schools*); believing that . . . (*we should break up*); hoping that . . . (*I'll sell some stock*)?"
- "Why do you feel so strongly about this?"
- "What exact problems are we trying to solve?"

The answers to these questions are the interests or the reasons why we have come to a specific solution. In the case of the partner who wants to move to a larger house, we may discover that she or he has run out of closet space and feels penned in. The partner may feel overwhelmed with all the possessions that have accumulated in the house yet not want to part with them. Wanting more room but not wanting to get rid of possessions is the interest or reason why the partner arrived at a specific solution. The partner who wants to

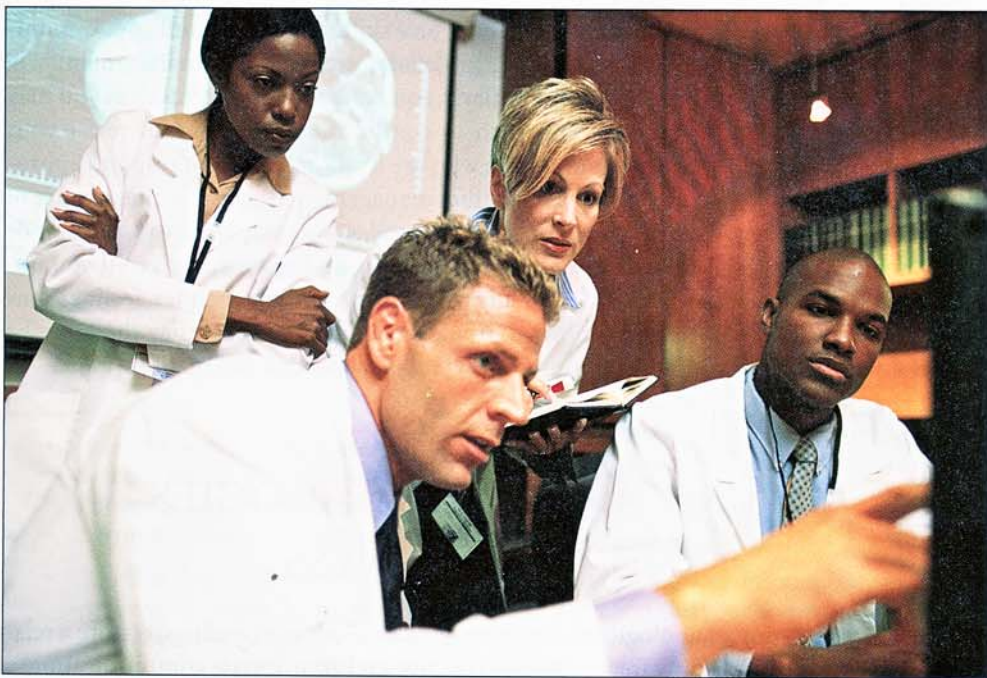
stay put may not want to leave friends in the neighborhood and force the kids to attend different schools. After obtaining the reasons that underlie the specific positions, the partners can then focus on points of agreement and work toward a mutually satisfying solution.

Generate a Variety of Possibilities Before Deciding What to do (Options) This step entails trying to develop as many options as possible that can meet both parties' interests. For example, we can say:

- "Can you think of at least two other ways of getting what you want?"
- "What might be the perfect situation?"
- "Can we focus on new solutions that would make you feel better?"
- "Let's explore all the options that are available to us."

The key to this step in the collaboration process is to **brainstorm**, that is, generate as many solutions as possible that can meet each partner's needs. Solutions are not judged during the brainstorming phase of collaborative conflict management. Our aim at this point is quantity, not quality; we evaluate the possibilities in the next stage of the collaboration process. The possibilities available to the partners engaged in conflict about space include installing a closet in the garage, building a storage shed in the backyard, asking friends to temporarily store some of the possessions, and paying to store some of the possessions in a self-storage facility. Other possibilities include moving to a larger house down the block or in the same neighborhood so that friends remain in close proximity and the children remain in their schools.

Insist that the Results Be Based on Some Objective Standard (Criteria) A principle of fairness or some objective standard should be used to justify a mutually satisfying solution in collaborative conflict resolution. Fair standards can be based on costs, scientific



Collaborative conflict resolution involves making use of a variety of communication skills to help partners reach their goals.



Engaging in Collaborative Conflict Resolution

Role-play the following situations with a partner, and have other members of the class evaluate you and your partner's ability to engage in win-win collaborative conflict resolution. You will need to create interests or reasons that underlie your positions or solutions to the following conflict situations:

- A friend wants to go bowling while another friend wants to see a movie.
- A parent wants her or his teenager to engage in more study time while the teenager wants to get a part-time job.
- A husband wants to go on an ocean cruise while the wife wants to fix up the house.
- A partner wants lots of pets while the other partner doesn't want even one.
- An employee wants a raise while the boss wants to cut back on her or his work hours.

judgment, what a court might decide, ease of compliance, moral or professional standards, equal treatment, and efficiency. For example, we can say:

- "What do you think is the most important criterion or standard to guide our thinking about which solution is best?"
- "Would you be most satisfied with a solution that is least expensive?"
- "Would you agree to a solution that we can put into place in the least amount of time?"

Any of these questions can apply to the partners who need more space yet desire to stay close to friends and the children's schools.

Remember to be realistic about the guidelines and skills related to conflict communication. There is no guarantee that engaging in collaborative conflict management will meet the needs of all parties in a dispute. Similarly, someone more powerful than you may make use of a win-lose, competing approach to conflict management and reject your request to engage in collaboration, and people who are irrational may not respond appropriately and effectively to your attempts at conflict management. Instead of making use of the collaborative or compromising personal conflict styles, you may need to withdraw or accommodate a relational partner who is extremely angry and aggressive. Even if you initially use conflict management skills in an effective and appropriate manner, feelings may be hurt and angry words may be expressed. Apologies and forgiveness may therefore be competent responses to conflict communication that is ineffective and inappropriate.



COMMUNICATING APOLOGIES AND FORGIVENESS

The communication of apologies and forgiveness can soothe hurt feelings, restore a relationship, and pave the way for a return to effective and appropriate communication.