

Summary of book entitled  
**COMPETENCE IN INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT**  
By William Cupach and Dan Canary

**Purpose of Book:** to understand the dynamics of interpersonal conflict and acquire skills for resolving it.

**DEFINITION:** Definitions of interpersonal conflict usually involve 2 elements:

- behavior (actual and perceived verbal and physical behavior during disagreement)
- episode (specific situation where disagreement or perception of disagreement or hostility occurs)

**A definition:** A struggle between 2 interdependent parties who struggle for or perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources, and interference from the other party in achieving goals.

**FEATURES OF INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT**

Interpersonal conflict arises when people need to coordinate actions and activities with one another. There are 3 levels of interpersonal conflict:

1. **Specific conflicts** over preferences concerning what TV show to watch, how long to cook vegetables, or whether to open or close a window.
2. **Relationship problems** over roles, for example, who should clean and cook, who should pick up mail or answer phone in office,
3. **Conflicts over personal characteristics** and attitudes, for example, a person's preferences, principles, religious ideas, driving style, drinking habits, reliability

In conflict these 3 levels are often mixed. For example, a friend doesn't call to say she'll be late (specific problem), she doesn't show consideration as a friend (relational problem) and you decide because she's a thoughtless person you cannot get along with her (personal characteristic of thoughtlessness).

Some conflicts are isolated events and others are difficulties over a relationship.

**HOW CONFLICT IS UNDERSTOOD**

1. **Conflict is accurately perceived** by both parties (Sue wants to marry and Joe doesn't.)
2. **Perceptions of conflict are skewed** (She doesn't know if Joe wants to marry.)
3. **Misunderstood conflict** (A person doesn't understand conflict, for example, who started a rumor, who was gossiping behind her back, who initiated a divorce)
4. **Latent Conflict** - Conflict should be occurring but isn't (couples with real differences in values, but pretend differences don't matter)
5. **False Conflict** - People disagree but have no objective basis for disagreement. These conflicts arise from misunderstanding. For example, a jealous lover thinks his girlfriend is cheating on him and she isn't. Often this type of person cannot admit perceptual error.

## **MANAGING INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT**

The manner in which a person manages conflict strongly influences the relational outcome. People assess the competence of other people's conflict behavior. If a person manages conflict well, people respect that person. If a person becomes very angry and even uses violence to resolve conflict, people will condemn that person.

People judge someone's conflict management skills primarily by the way the person communicates. Communication should have two qualities: it should be effective and appropriate.

**EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION**: Communication is effective if it accomplishes the goals we set out to accomplish. To accomplish our goals we must present ourselves well, that is, as trustworthy, credible, and fair. We must decide how to retain a good relationship while still obtaining our goals. Sometimes our goals are only known to us in a hazy way. Often goals are formulated as we engage in conflict. Goals are altered with new information. Competent communicators learn how to adapt to the dynamic circumstances of the interaction.

**APPROPRIATENESS**: Appropriateness means observing social rules such as courtesy, politeness, civility, and respect for others. If someone asks a question, we ought to give an answer, try not to interrupt a conversation, know what to say when you meet someone, display a relaxed and confident demeanor, support co-communicators, show dynamism and animation during conversation using vocal emphasis, humor, and appropriate gestures. These are all publicly accepted social rules.

A married couple may adopt conflict rules such trying not to argue in public, not raise their voices, to listen carefully to each other, get to the point quickly, and not make each other feel guilty.

Getting along with others often helps you get what you want. When people judge competence at getting along with others, they judge prohibited behavior more harshly than behavior which is preferred.

You can maximize your ability to get along by being competent at conflict resolution.

**Knowledge** of conflict comes from experiencing it and developing effective responses.

**Motivation** means you must want to use appropriate and effective means to resolve conflict. You must feel confident you can reach your goals.

**Skill** means adaptability, tailoring communication to the persons and situation at hand. These skills are developed by practice.

Other factors which affect conflict: the context of the conflict, the culture, gender, and personalities of people involved (whether aggressive or shy), people's explanations of behavior (whether it was caused by personality or by the specific situation and circumstances at hand)

## **STRATEGIES IN HANDLING CONFLICT**

There are several different strategies for handling conflict which include cooperation, confrontation, and avoidance.

**Cooperative strategies** include being polite, understanding, communicative and supportive during the conflict. You assume there are creative solutions and everyone can win. Your goal is to work with the person to resolve the conflict. You meet with the person to discuss the situation, try not to make the other person wrong, seek and disclose information, make supportive statements, listen in a supportive manner, make statements which show a willingness to change and be flexible, seek areas of commonality and agreement, give credit for good intentions, refrain from blaming, accept responsibility for your share of the conflict, and

negotiate fair solutions. The following would be a typical script for someone engaging in cooperative conflict.

"Do you have a second to talk? I promise this will only take a second. It seems to me that the dining room table has been full for the past week mostly with lots of papers and books that are yours. I realize you've been busy with two jobs and school and all. And I know I often litter the house with my things. But I wonder if you could put your papers and books in the study, so we can eat in the dining room when the guests come over?"

**Confrontational strategies** include threats, demands, coercion, hostility, intimidation, personal criticism, put-downs, ridicule, sarcasm, contempt, denial of responsibility, negative assessment of others. People engage in this form of conflict from a competitive attitude that one can gain only at the expense of another. In belligerent forms of confrontational conflict people don't care enough even to consider how a message might affect the other person. There is no effort to consider the needs of the other person. People ask leading questions that fault the other person, they ask hostile questions and try to invalidate the other person.

**Avoidance strategies** include withholding a complaint when conflict is deemed too costly, making irrelevant or non-committal remarks to divert attention from conflict, ignoring or failing to answer questions, leaving the room, not voicing complaints openly, making abstract remarks like "If you say so." People who avoid conflict keep tensions buried. Avoidance can be either agreeable or disagreeable depending on the situation and the manner in which the person behaves.

**Nonverbal messages** during conflict include: indicators of involvement, cooperation, and conciliation would be: paying attention to content, being calm and relaxed, speaking in a mellow and slow voice, using a lower and deeper pitch, and facing the person directly. Indicators of disgust are wrinkling the nose (as if you smell something) and raising the upper lip at the same time. Indicators of contempt are rolling the eyes or moving the mouth to one side laterally. People show anger by raising their voice, clenching fists, and clenching teeth.

## **INDIVIDUAL STYLES IN INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT**

There are certain personal characteristics which are worth describing in order to understand interpersonal conflict better. They are the following:

**Argumentativeness** - Some people naturally engage with other people by arguing about issues. This is their style of interacting. They take positions on controversial issues, and focus on the issues and not the personality of their adversary. These people often have skill in conflict management. Other argumentative people lack skill in engaging, resort to personal attacks, and are considered deficient in handling conflict.

**Aggressiveness** - People become aggressive during conflict for 4 reasons: frustration (they are deliberately blocked by another person), social learning (they learned aggressive behavior at home and in the community), psychopathology (person you attack represents an unresolved pain or fear), skill deficiency (they can't communicate in an appropriate or effective manner). People who become aggressive must learn to manage conflict without attacking people aggressively or maliciously.

**Tendency to explain or interpret other people's behavior as positive or negative** - People who tend to have a positive view of human nature and an optimistic view of life often give people the benefit of the doubt and try to understand why people behave the way they do. People with a negative view of human nature and a pessimistic view of life tend to interpret other people's behavior as blameworthy, intentional, and selfish. Depending on how you explain other people in your own mind, you can avoid serious conflict or you can engage in conflict. In a conflict, if both people are negative and both people are willing to engage in confrontation, this can greatly escalate the intensity of the conflict and polarize the situation. In a conflict, if both people have a positive view and are willing to take responsibility and cooperate, this can diminish the severity of the conflict.

**Tendency to take conflict personally or not** - Some people dislike and avoid conflict because good relationships mean a lot to them and they think conflict will damage these relationships. Some people feel directly hurt by conflict and even feel persecuted by it so they experience a high degree of stress. These people need to understand and manage conflict better, because they may be hurting themselves by not engaging in valid conflict when it is necessary.

**Locus of control** - the locus of control means the expectation you have for yourself to achieve certain outcomes. People with an internal locus of control attribute successes and failures as being a result of their own ability and effort. People with an external locus of control feel outcomes are determined by chance or fate or in powerful other people in control. **People with an internal locus of control try harder to resolve conflict using a problem-solving approach.** These people tend to rely on cooperative approaches to conflict. People with an external locus of control rely on avoidance and competition in conflict situations.

**Sex and Gender** - In general women are considered passive and cooperative and men are considered assertive and aggressive in conflict. But ironically, in close relationships such as marriage, men withdraw and avoid conflict and women are more assertive.

**Conflict in Relationships** - Couples who are happy usually focus on cooperative conflict, they focus on the content of what is being said, and they do not reciprocate negative emotion.

## **SPONTANEOUS REACTIONS TO CONFLICT**

When a conflict arises people react with behavior, thought, and emotions. This behavior involves both people party to the conflict, so both people define how the conflict evolves. Initial responses involve anger, physiological reactions and scripts that guide the expression of anger, and people's interpretations, expectations and goals in the conflict.

**Anger** - Conflict often produces anger. Some of the causes of anger are: blame, reproach, insult, condescension, aggression (physical threat, verbal abuse), frustration, lack of fairness, unreliable behavior, incompetence, self-centeredness, bad weather, someone else's negative attitude.

People also respond to conflict with **fear** and then they become angry. People show anger when they are in **pain** or **when they are sad**. Any emotional state is a complicated response with feelings, physiological reactions, motor responses, thoughts and memories. Any negative arousal can elicit angry responses. Environmental factors such as heat, pollution, foul odors, and cigarette smoke can cause aggression and anger. A polluted, crowded city during hot summer months sets the stage for aggressive responses. People become angry as their comfort level decreases and they may lash out. Stress is also associated with aggression and

anger. If people are under pressure to meet deadlines and obstacles frustrate them, they may become angry.

**Physiological reactions** - When faced with conflict people sometimes experience such physical changes as increases in cardiac rate, sweating, shortness of breath, reduction of blood flow to large skeletal muscles, and release of adrenalin. Once people are aroused there can be a buildup of negative arousal and people can overreact to the initial cause of the conflict. The flooding effect of the physiological reactions may prevent people from thinking straight. Men often experience more physiological flooding than women and it takes longer for the arousal to wear off. Women are so trained to attend to good relations, they are more concerned about the other person, and tend to engage in positive interpretations and explanations regarding conflict (see next segment), whereas men may have more trouble with restraint in a conflict.

**Scripts** - These are narratives in people's heads for how conflict should progress and for how anger should be handled. A typical anger script has 3 stages: Stage 1 - There is a cause for anger, Stage 2 - people react with complaints, verbal attacks, physical threats, frowning, slamming doors, brooding, feelings of anxiety and discomfort - Stage 3- the parties realize if the anger continues one or both parties and the relationship will be hurt, so parties collect themselves and work it out, or they decide to separate for a while, or if neither party knows how to manage conflict they may resort to violence. Stage 2 does not have any productive behavior because most people do not see productive behavior as part of their script.

**People's interpretations and expectations** - Interpretations and expectations people have about the causes of conflict play a major role. People who tend to have a negative view of human nature and a pessimistic outlook on life tend to think the person is at fault (not the situation), and fail to try to understand the underlying causes of conflict. These people may tend to blame others and have a judgmental approach. These people are more likely to engage in confrontational strategies. People who have a positive view of human nature and an optimistic outlook on life tend to engage in cooperative conflict resolution strategies. They focus on taking some responsibility for the conflict and on what they can do to remedy the situation. These people habitually interpret other people's behavior in a more positive light thinking people can have a bad day or people have a good intent or people have considerable potential to behave better.

**A reminder about goals in interpersonal conflict** - In the context of interpersonal conflict, three goals have to be considered: goals for a person's advancement (goals to obtain resources and favors), goals for good relationships (developing, maintaining, or ending personal or professional relationships) and self-preservation (your public image and how you want to be seen). All three goals operate during conflict. **The clearer you are about your goals, the more likely you'll obtain what you want.** In American culture personal advancement goals are of highest importance to most people, whereas in Asia maintaining good relationships are of paramount importance.

## **OUTCOMES OF CONFLICT**

Competent conflict management is constructive for relationships, just as negative conflict management is damaging to relationships. Conflict can be the impetus for solving problems, it gives relationships vitality and novelty, when solved competently it produces feelings of satisfaction and fosters interpersonal solidarity, and it offers opportunities for personal exploration, understanding, and growth.

People manage conflict by combining the disputing parties resources to solve the problem, discuss the problem carefully, listening attentively, and proposing and evaluating solutions. If parties cannot agree, then agree to disagree. Compromise may not be ideal, but it may represent some gain and minimize losses. Avoid returning anger for anger. A party's response should not exceed what is necessary to correct the situation. Try to avoid aggression and violence.

During conflict discussions, imagine you have a sack over your shoulder with all of the different things you could say to your adversary. The sack contains statements that can be divided into "zingers" or polite remarks. During conflict, imagine reaching into the sack for something to say. You can be polite and still disagree.