After studying the material in this chapter...

You should understand:
1. The role of communication climate in interpersonal relationships.
2. Types of messages that contribute to confirming and disconfirming climates.
3. The unavoidable but potentially problematic role of conflict in interpersonal relationships.
5. The influence of culture and gender on conflict styles.

You should be able to:
1. Identify disconfirming messages and replace them with confirming ones, using the Gibb categories of supportive communication.
2. Describe the degree to which you use nonassertive, directly aggressive, passive-aggressive, indirect, and assertive messages and choose more satisfying responses as necessary.
3. Compose and deliver an assertive message, using the behavior-interpretation-feeling-consequence-intention format.
4. Apply the win–win approach to an interpersonal conflict.
CHAPTER HIGHLIGHTS

Communication climates are intangible but critical ingredients in relational satisfaction. In the first part of this chapter, you will learn

- What makes some messages confirming and other messages disconfirming.
- How communication climates develop.
- Some tips for creating positive communication climates.

The second half of this chapter focuses on conflict in relationships. Sections cover

- The nature of conflict.
- How people express conflict.
- The influence of gender and culture on conflict in relationships.
- Methods of conflict resolution, including the win–win approach.
No matter how satisfying your relationships, there are almost certainly ways they could be better. At times even the best of friends, the closest of families, and the most productive coworkers become dissatisfied. Sometimes the people involved are unhappy with each other. At other times, one person’s problem is unrelated to the relationship. In either case, there’s a desire to communicate in a way that makes matters better.

The ideas in this chapter can help you improve the important relationships in your life. We’ll begin by talking about the factors that make communication ‘climates’ either positive or negative. Next we’ll focus on methods for understanding and resolving interpersonal conflicts.

**COMMUNICATION CLIMATES IN INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS**

Personal relationships are a lot like the weather. Some are fair and warm, whereas others are stormy and cold; some are polluted, and others healthy. Some relationships have stable climates, whereas others change dramatically—calm one moment and turbulent the next. You can’t measure the interpersonal climate by looking at a thermometer or glancing at the sky, but it’s there nonetheless. Every relationship has a feeling, a pervasive mood that colors the interactions of the participants. The term *communication climate* refers to the emotional tone of a relationship. A climate doesn’t involve specific activities as much as the way people feel about each other as they carry out those activities. Consider two communication classes, for example. Both meet for the same length of time and follow the same syllabus. It’s easy to imagine how one of these classes might be a friendly, comfortable place to learn, whereas the other might be cold and tense—even hostile. The same principle holds for families, coworkers, and other relationships: Communication climates are a function more of the way people feel about one another than of the tasks they perform.

**Confirming and Disconfirming Messages**

What makes some climates positive and others negative? A short but accurate answer is that the *communication climate is determined by the degree to which people see themselves as valued*. When we believe others view us as important,
we are likely to feel good about our relationship. On the other hand, the relational climate suffers when we think others don’t appreciate or care about us.

Messages that show you are valued have been called confirming responses. In one form or another, confirming responses say “you exist,” “you matter,” “you’re important.” Actually, it’s an oversimplification to talk about one type of confirming message. In truth, confirming communication occurs on three increasingly positive levels:

- **Recognition** The most fundamental act of confirmation is to recognize the other person. Recognition seems easy and obvious, and yet there are many times when we do not respond to others on this basic level. Failure to write or visit a friend is a common example. So is failure to return a phone message. Avoiding eye contact and not approaching someone you know on campus, at a party, or on the street send a negative message. Of course, this lack of recognition may simply be an oversight. You might not notice your friend, or the pressures of work and school might prevent you from staying in touch. Nonetheless, if the other person perceives you as avoiding contact, the message has the effect of being disconfirming.

- **Acknowledgment** Acknowledging the ideas and feelings of others is a stronger form of confirmation. Listening is probably the most common form of acknowledgment. Of course, counterfeit listening—ambushing, stage hogging, pseudolistening, and so on—has the opposite effect of acknowledgment. More active acknowledgment includes asking questions, paraphrasing, and reflecting. Not surprisingly, employees rate managers who solicit their suggestions highly—even when the managers don’t accept every suggestion. As you read in Chapter 4, reflecting the speaker’s thoughts and feelings can be a powerful way to offer support when others have problems.

- **Endorsement** Whereas acknowledgment means you are interested in another’s ideas, endorsement means that you agree with them. It’s easy to see why endorsement is the strongest type of confirming message, because it communicates the highest form of valuing. The most obvious form of endorsement is agreeing. Fortunately, it isn’t necessary to agree completely with another person in order to endorse her or his message. You can probably find something in the message that you endorse. “I can see why you were so angry,” you might reply to a friend, even if you don’t approve of his outburst. Of course, outright praise is a strong form of endorsement and one you can use surprisingly often after you look for opportunities to compliment others. Nonverbal endorsement can also enhance the quality of a relational climate. For example, women rate men who agree with them as more physically attractive than those who fail to do so.

It’s hard to overstate the importance of confirming messages. For instance, a positive climate is the best predictor of marital satisfaction. Satisfied couples have a 5:1 ratio of positive to negative statements, whereas the ratio for dissatisfied partners is 1:1. Positive, confirming messages are just as important in families. For example, the satisfaction that siblings feel with one another drops sharply as aggressive, disconfirming messages increase. Confirmation is just as important in the classroom, where motivation and learning increase when teachers demonstrate a genuine interest and concern for students.

In contrast to confirming communication, messages that deny the value of others have been labeled disconfirming responses. These show a lack of regard
for the other person either by disputing or ignoring some important part of that person's message. Disagreement can certainly be disconfirming, especially if it goes beyond disputing the other person's ideas and attacks the speaker personally. However, disagreement is not the most damaging kind of disconfirmation. It may be tough to hear someone say, "I don't think that's a good idea," but a personal attack like "You're crazy" is even tougher to hear. Far worse than disagreements are responses that ignore others' ideas—or even their existence.

The photo on page 228 captures both confirming and disconfirming messages. The two office athletes are obviously enjoying each other's company while they ignore their colleague.

Not all disconfirming behavior is unintentional. Table 7–1 lists a number of deliberate tactics that have been used to create distance in an undesired relationship. It's easy to see how each of them is inherently disconfirming.

As you read in Chapter 6, every message has a relational dimension along with its content. This means that, whether or not we are aware of the fact, we send

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tactic</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Avoidance</td>
<td>Evading the other person.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deception</td>
<td>Lying to or misleading the other person.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degrading</td>
<td>Treating the other person with disrespect.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detachment</td>
<td>Acting emotionally disinterested in the other person.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discounting</td>
<td>Disregarding or minimizing importance of what the other person says.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humoring</td>
<td>Not taking the other person seriously.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impersonality</td>
<td>Treating the other person like a stranger; interacting with her/him as a role rather than a unique individual.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inattention</td>
<td>Not paying attention to the other person.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonimmediacy</td>
<td>Displaying verbal or nonverbal clues that minimize interest, closeness, or availability.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reserve</td>
<td>Being unusually quiet and uncommunicative.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restraint</td>
<td>Curtailing normal social behaviors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restrict topics</td>
<td>Limiting conversation to less personal topics.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shorten interaction</td>
<td>Ending conversations as quickly as possible.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

and receive confirming and disconfirming messages virtually whenever we communicate. Serious conversations about our relationships may not be common, but we convey our attitudes about one another even when we talk about everyday matters. In other words, it isn’t what we communicate about that shapes a relational climate so much as how we speak and act toward one another.

It’s important to note that disconfirming messages, like virtually every other kind of communication, are a matter of perception. Communicators are likely to downplay the significance of a potentially hurtful message that they consider to be unintentional. On the other hand, even messages that aren’t intended to de-value the other person can be interpreted as disconfirming. Your failure to return a phone call or respond to the letter of an out-of-town friend might simply be the result of a busy schedule; but if the other person views the lack of contact as a sign that you don’t value the relationship, the effect can be powerful.

**How Communication Climates Develop**

As soon as two people start to communicate, a relational climate begins to develop. If the messages are confirming, the climate is likely to be a positive one. If they disconfirm one another, the climate is likely to be hostile, cold, or defensive.

Verbal messages certainly contribute to the tone of a relationship, but many climate-shaping messages are nonverbal. The very act of approaching others is confirming, whereas avoiding them can be disconfirming. Smiles or frowns, the presence or absence of eye contact, tone of voice, the use of personal space—all these and other cues send messages about how the parties feel toward one another.

After a climate is formed, it can take on a life of its own and grow in a self-perpetuating spiral: a reciprocating communication pattern in which each person’s message reinforces the other’s. In positive spirals, one partner’s confirming message leads to a similar response from the other person. This positive reaction leads the first person to be even more reinforcing. Negative spirals are just as powerful, though they leave the partners feeling worse about themselves and each other. Research shows how spirals operate in relationships to reinforce the principle that “what goes around comes around.” In one study of married couples, each spouse’s response in conflict situations was similar to the other’s statement. Conciliatory statements (for example, supporting, accepting responsibilities, agreeing) were likely to be followed by conciliatory responses. Confrontational acts (such as criticism, hostile questions, and faultfinding) were likely to trigger aggressive responses. The same pattern held for other kinds of messages. Avoidance begat avoidance, analysis begat analysis, and so on.

**Escalatory conflict spirals** are the most visible way that disconfirming messages reinforce one another. One attack leads to another until a skirmish escalates into a full-fledged battle. Although they are less obvious, **deescalatory conflict spirals** can also be destructive. Rather than fighting, the parties slowly lessen their dependence on one another, withdraw, and become less invested in the relationship.

Spirals rarely go on indefinitely. Most relationships pass through cycles of progression and regression. If the spiral is negative, partners may find the exchange growing so unpleasant that they switch from negative to positive messages without discussing the matter. In other cases they may engage in metacommunication. “Hold on,” one might say. “This is getting us nowhere.” In some cases, however, partners pass the “point of no return,” leading to the breakup of a relationship. Even
positive spirals have their limit: Even the best relationships go through periods of conflict and withdrawal, although a combination of time and communication skills can eventually bring the partners back into greater harmony.

Creating Positive Communication Climates

It’s easy to see how disconfirming messages can pollute a communication climate. But what are some alternative ways of communicating that encourage positive relationships? The work of Jack Gibb gives a picture of what kinds of messages lead to both positive and negative spirals.15

After observing groups for several years, Gibb was able to isolate six types of defense-arousing communication and six contrasting behaviors that seemed to reduce the level of threat and defensiveness. The Gibb categories are listed in Table 7–2. Using the supportive types of communication and avoiding the defensive ones will increase the odds of creating and maintaining positive communication climates in your relationships.

EVALUATION VERSUS DESCRIPTION

The first type of defense-provoking behavior Gibb noted was evaluative communication. Most people become irritated at judgmental statements, which are likely to be interpreted as indicating a lack of regard. Evaluative language has often been described as “you” language because most such statements contain an accusatory use of that word. For example,

- You don’t know what you’re talking about.
- You’re not doing your best.
- You smoke too much.

Unlike evaluative “you” language, descriptive communication focuses on the speaker’s thoughts and feelings instead of judging the listener. One form of descriptive communication is “I” language.16 Instead of putting the emphasis on judging another’s behavior, the descriptive speaker explains the personal effect of the other’s action. For instance, instead of saying, “You talk too much,” a descriptive communicator would say, “When you don’t give me a chance to say what’s on my mind, I get frustrated.” Notice that statements such as this include an account of the other person’s behavior plus an explanation of its effect on the speaker and a description of the speaker’s feelings.

CONTROL VERSUS PROBLEM ORIENTATION

A second defense-provoking message involves some attempt to control the other person. A controlling message occurs when a sender seems to be imposing a solution on the receiver with little regard for the receiver’s needs or interests. The control can range from relatively small matters (where to eat dinner or what TV show to watch) to large ones (whether to remain in a relationship or how to spend a large sum of money).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 7–2 The Gibb Categories of Defensive and Supportive Behaviors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Defensive Behaviors</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Evaluation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Superiority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Certainty</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Whatever the situation, people who act in controlling ways create a defensive climate. Researchers have found that the communication of abusive couples was characterized by opposition to one another’s viewpoints. The unspoken message such behavior communicates is “I know what’s best for you, and if you do as I say, we’ll get along.”

By contrast, in problem orientation, communicators focus on finding a solution that satisfies both their needs and those of the others involved. The goal here isn’t to “win” at the expense of your partner but rather to work out some arrangement in which everybody feels like a winner. The sidebar “A Comparison of Dialogue and Debate” above shows several important differences between controlling and problem-oriented communication. The last section of this chapter has a great deal to say about “win–win” problem solving as a way to find problem-oriented solutions.

**STRATEGY VERSUS SPONTANEITY** The third communication behavior that Gibb identified as creating a poor communication climate is strategy. A more accurate term to describe this type of behavior is manipulation. Manipulation explains why most people detest coworkers who act friendly to peers while acting friendly and helpful to the boss. One of the surest ways to make people defensive is to get caught trying to manipulate them. Nobody likes to be a guinea pig or a sucker, and even well-meant manipulation can cause bad feelings.

Spontaneity is the label Gibb used as a contrast to strategy. A better term might be honesty. Despite the misleading label, spontaneous communication needn’t be blurted out as soon as an idea comes to you. You might want to plan the wording of your message carefully so that you can express yourself clearly. The important thing is to be honest. A straightforward message may not always get what you want, but in the long run it’s likely to pay dividends in a positive relational climate.
NEUTRALITY VERSUS EMPATHY

Gibb used the term neutrality to describe a fourth behavior that arouses defensiveness. Probably a more descriptive term would be indifference. A neutral attitude is disconfirming because it communicates a lack of concern for the welfare of another and implies that the other person isn’t very important to you.

The damaging effects of neutrality become apparent when you consider the hostility that most people have for the large, impersonal organizations with which they have to deal: “They think of me as a number instead of a person”; “I felt as if I were being handled by computers and not human beings.” These two common statements reflect reactions to being handled in an indifferent way.

Empathy is an approach that confirms the other person. Having empathy means accepting another’s feelings, putting yourself in another’s place. This doesn’t mean you need to agree with that person. Gibb noted the importance of nonverbal messages in communicating empathy. He found that facial and bodily expressions of concern are often more important to the receiver than the words used.

SUPERIORITY VERSUS EQUALITY

Superiority is a fifth type of communication that creates a defensive climate. When it seems that people believe they are better than we are, a defensive response is likely.

We often meet people who possess knowledge or talents greater than ours. But your own experiences will tell you that it isn’t necessary for these people to project an attitude of superiority. Gibb found ample evidence that many who have superior skills and talents are capable of conveying an attitude of equality. Such people communicate that, although they may have greater talent in certain areas, they see others as having just as much worth as human beings.

CERTAINTY VERSUS PROVISIONALISM

Dogmatism is another term for the behavior Gibb calls certainty. Messages that suggest the speaker’s mind is already made up are likely to generate defensiveness.

In contrast to dogmatic communication is provisionalism, in which people may have strong opinions but are willing to acknowledge that they don’t have a corner on the truth and will change their stand if another position seems more reasonable.

There is no guarantee that using Gibb’s supportive, confirming approach to communication will build a positive climate. But the chances for a constructive relationship will be greatest when communication consists of the kind of con-
structive approach described here. Besides boosting the odds of getting a positive response from others, supportive communication can leave you feeling better in a variety of ways: more in control of your relationships, more comfortable, and more positive toward others.

**MANAGING INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT**

Even the most supportive communication climate won’t guarantee complete harmony. Regardless of what we may wish for or dream about, a conflict-free world just doesn’t exist. Even the best communicators, the luckiest people, are bound to wind up in situations when their needs don’t match the needs of others. Money, time, power, sex, humor, aesthetic taste, as well as a thousand other issues, arise and keep us from living in a state of perpetual agreement.

For many people the inevitability of conflict is a depressing fact. They think that the existence of ongoing conflict means that there’s little chance for happy relationships with others. Effective communicators know differently, however. They realize that although it’s impossible to eliminate conflict, there are ways to manage it effectively. And those effective communicators know the subject of this chapter—that managing conflict skillfully can open the door to healthier, stronger, and more satisfying relationships.

**The Nature of Conflict**

Whatever forms they may take, all interpersonal conflicts share certain similarities. Joyce Frost and William Wilmot provide a thorough definition of conflict. They state that conflict is an expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce rewards, and interference from the other parties in achieving their goals. A closer look at the various parts of this definition helps to develop a clearer idea of how conflicts operate.

**EXPRESSED STRUGGLE** A conflict doesn’t exist unless both parties know that some disagreement exists. You may be upset for months because a neighbor’s loud stereo keeps you from getting to sleep at night, but no conflict exists between the two of you until the neighbor learns about your problem. Of course, the expressed struggle doesn’t have to be verbal. You can show your displeasure with somebody without saying a word. Giving a dirty look, using the silent treatment, and avoiding the other person are all ways of expressing yourself. But one way or another, both parties must know that a problem exists before they’re in conflict.

**PERCEIVED INCOMPATIBLE GOALS** Conflicts often look as if one party’s gain will be another’s loss. For instance, consider the neighbor whose music keeps you awake at night. Does somebody have to lose? A neighbor who turns down the noise loses the enjoyment of hearing the music at full volume; but if the neighbor keeps the volume up, then you’re still awake and unhappy.

But the goals in this situation really aren’t completely incompatible—solutions do exist that allow both parties to get what they want. For instance, you could
achieve peace and quiet by closing your windows and getting the neighbor to do the same. You might use a pair of earplugs. Or perhaps the neighbor could get a set of headphones and listen to the music at full volume without bothering anyone. If any of these solutions proves workable, then the conflict disappears. Unfortunately, people often fail to see mutually satisfying answers to their problems. And as long as they perceive their goals to be mutually exclusive, they create a self-fulfilling prophecy in which the conflict is very real.

**PERCEIVED SCARCE REWARDS**  In a conflict, people believe there isn’t enough of some resource to go around. The most obvious example of a scarce resource is money—a cause of many conflicts. If a person asks for a raise in pay and the boss would rather keep the money or use it to expand the business, then the two parties are in conflict.

Time is another scarce commodity. As authors and family men, both of us are constantly in the middle of struggles about how to use the limited time we have to spend. Should we work on this book? Visit with our wives? Spend time with our kids? Enjoy the luxury of being alone? With only twenty-four hours in a day we’re bound to end up in conflicts with our families, editors, students, and friends—all of whom want more of our time than we have available to give.

**INTERDEPENDENCE**  However antagonistic they might feel toward each other, the parties in a conflict are usually dependent on each other. The welfare and satisfaction of one depend on the actions of another. If this weren’t true, then even in the face of scarce resources and incompatible goals there would be no need for conflict. Interdependence exists between conflicting nations, social groups, organizations, friends, and lovers. In each case, if the two parties didn’t need each other to solve the problem, both would go their separate ways. In fact, many conflicts go unresolved because the parties fail to understand their interdependence. One of the first steps toward resolving a conflict is to take the attitude that “we’re in this together.”

**Styles of Expressing Conflict**

Communication scholars have identified a wide range of ways communicators handle conflicts. Table 7–3 describes five ways people can act when their needs are not met. Each one has very different characteristics.

**NONASSERTION**  Nonassertion is the inability or unwillingness to express thoughts or feelings in a conflict. Sometimes nonassertion comes from a lack of confidence. At other times, people lack the awareness or skill to use a more direct means of expression.

Sometimes people know how to communicate in a straightforward way but choose to behave nonassertively. For example, women are less likely to clearly refuse an unwanted request for physical intimacy from a dating partner who they would like to see in the future than one whom they don’t want to see again.

Nonassertion is a surprisingly common way of dealing with conflicts. One survey examined the conflict level of husbands and wives in normal “nondistressed” marriages. Over a five-day period, spouses reported that their partner engaged in an average of thirteen behaviors that were “displeasurable” to them but that they had only one confrontation during the same period.
Nonassertion can take a variety of forms. One is avoidance—either physical (steering clear of a friend after having an argument) or conversational (changing the topic, joking, or denying that a problem exists). People who avoid conflicts usually believe it’s easier to put up with the status quo than to face the problem head-on and try to solve it. Accommodation is another type of nonassertive response. Accommodators deal with conflict by giving in, putting the other’s needs ahead of their own.

Despite the obvious drawbacks of nonassertion, there are situations when accommodating or avoiding is a sensible approach. Avoidance may be the best course if a conflict is minor and short-lived. For example, you might let a friend’s annoying grumpiness pass without saying anything, knowing that he is having one of his rare bad days. Likewise, you might not complain to a neighbor whose lawn sprinklers occasionally hit your newly washed car. You may also reasonably choose to keep quiet if the conflict occurs in an unimportant relationship, as with an acquaintance whose language you find offensive but whom you don’t see often. Finally, you might choose to keep quiet if the risk of speaking up is too great:

**TABLE 7-3 Individual Styles of Conflict**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Nonassertive</th>
<th>Directly Aggressive</th>
<th>Passively Aggressive</th>
<th>Indirect</th>
<th>Assertive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Approach to Others</strong></td>
<td>I’m not okay, you’re okay.</td>
<td>I’m okay, you’re not okay.</td>
<td>I’m okay, you’re not okay.</td>
<td>I’m okay, you’re not okay.</td>
<td>I’m okay, you’re okay.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Decision Making</strong></td>
<td>Lets others choose.</td>
<td>Chooses for others. They know it.</td>
<td>Chooses for others. They don’t know it.</td>
<td>Chooses for others. They don’t know it.</td>
<td>Chooses for self.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Self-Sufficiency</strong></td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High or low</td>
<td>Looks high but usually low</td>
<td>High or low</td>
<td>Usually high</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Behavior in Problem Situations</strong></td>
<td>Flees; gives in outright attack</td>
<td>Reveals hidden self</td>
<td>Concealed attack</td>
<td>Strategic, oblique</td>
<td>Direct confrontation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Response of Others</strong></td>
<td>Disrespect, guilt, anger, frustration</td>
<td>Hurt, defensiveness, humiliation</td>
<td>Confusion, frustration, feelings of manipulation</td>
<td>Unknowing compliance or resistance</td>
<td>Mutual respect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Success Pattern</strong></td>
<td>Succeeds by luck or charity of others</td>
<td>Beats out others</td>
<td>Wins by manipulation</td>
<td>Gains unwitting compliance of others</td>
<td>Attempts “win-win” solutions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


**CULTURAL IDIOM**

steering clear of: avoiding
to face the problem head-on: to confront the problem directly
getting fired from a job you can’t afford to lose, being humiliated in public, or even risking physical harm.

**DIRECT AGGRESSION** Whereas nonasserters avoid conflicts, communicators who use direct aggression embrace them. A directly aggressive message confronts the other person in a way that attacks his or her position—and even the dignity of the receiver. Many directly aggressive responses are easy to spot: “You don’t know what you’re talking about.” “That was a stupid thing to do.” “What’s the matter with you?” Other forms of direct aggression come more from nonverbal messages than from words. It’s easy to imagine a hostile way of expressing statements like “What is it now?” or “I need some peace and quiet.”

Verbal aggressiveness may get you what you want in the short run. Yelling “Shut up” might stop the other person from talking, and saying “Get it yourself” may save you from some exertion; but the relational damage of this approach probably isn’t worth the cost.

Direct aggression can be hurtful, and the consequences for the relationship can be long-lasting. 23

**PASSIVE AGGRESSION** Passive aggression is far more subtle than its directly aggressive cousin. It occurs when a communicator expresses hostility in an obscure way. Psychologist George Bach terms this behavior “crazymaking” 24 and identifies several varieties. For example, “pseudoaccommodators” pretend to agree with you (“I’ll be on time from now on”) but don’t comply with your request for change. “Guiltmakers” try to gain control by making you feel responsible for changing to suit them: “I really should be studying but I’ll give you a ride.” “Jokers” use humor as a weapon and then hide behind the complaint (“Where’s your sense of humor?”) when you object. “Trivial tyrannizers” do small things to drive you crazy instead of confronting you with their complaints: “forgetting” to take phone messages, playing the music too loud, and so on. “Withholders” punish their partners by keeping back something valuable, such as courtesy, affection, or humor.

**INDIRECT COMMUNICATION** The clearest communication is not necessarily the best approach. Indirect communication conveys a message in a roundabout manner, in order to save face for the recipient. 25 Although indirect communication lacks the clarity of an aggressive or assertive message, it involves more initiative than nonassertion. It also has none of the hostility of passive-aggressive crazymaking. The goal is to get what you want without arousing the hostility of the other person. Consider the case of the neighbor’s annoying dog. One indirect approach would be to strike up a friendly conversation with the owners and ask if anything you are doing is too noisy for them, hoping they would get the hint.

Because it saves face for the other party, indirect communication is often kinder than blunt honesty. If your guests are staying too long, it’s probably kinder to yawn and hint about your big day tomorrow than to bluntly ask them to leave. Likewise,
if you’re not interested in going out with someone who has asked you for a date, it may be more compassionate to claim that you’re busy than to say “I’m not interested in seeing you.”

At other times we communicate indirectly in order to protect ourselves. You might, for example, test the waters by hinting instead of directly asking the boss for a raise, or by letting your partner know indirectly that you could use some affection instead of asking outright. At times like these, an oblique approach may get the message across while softening the blow of a negative response.

The advantages of protecting oneself and saving face for others help explain why indirect communication is the most common way people make requests. The risk of an indirect message, of course, is that the other party will misunderstand you or fail to get the message at all. There are also times when the importance of an idea is so great that hinting lacks the necessary punch. When clarity and directness are your goals, an assertive approach is in order.

**ASSERTION**  Assertive people handle conflicts by expressing their needs, thoughts, and feelings clearly and directly but without judging others or dictating to them. They have the attitude that most of the time it is possible to resolve problems to everyone’s satisfaction. Possessing this attitude and the skills to bring it about doesn’t guarantee that assertive communicators will always get what they want, but it does give them the best chance of doing so. An additional benefit of such an approach is that whether or not it satisfies a particular need, it maintains the self-respect of both the assertors and those with whom they interact. As a result, people who manage their conflicts assertively may experience feelings of discomfort while they are working through the problem. They usually feel better about themselves and each other afterward—quite a change from the outcomes of no assertiveness or aggression.

**ETHICAL CHALLENGE**  At first glance, assertiveness seems like the most ethical communication style to use when you are faced with a conflict. The matter might not be so clear, however. Find out for yourself by following these steps.

1. Decide for yourself whether it is ever justifiable to use each of the other conflict styles: nonassertion, direct aggression, passive aggression, and indirect communication. Support your position on each style with examples from your own experience.
2. Explain your answer to classmates who disagree, and listen to their arguments.
3. After hearing positions that differ from yours, work with your classmates to develop a code of ethics for expressing conflict messages.

**Characteristics of an Assertive Message**

Knowing about assertive messages isn’t the same as being able to express them. The next few pages will describe a method for communicating assertively. It works for a variety of messages: your hopes, problems, complaints, and appreciations. Besides giving you a way to express yourself directly, this format also
makes it easier for others to understand you. A complete assertive message has five parts:

1. **Behavioral Description**  As you learned in Chapter 3, a behavioral description is an objective picture of the behavior in question, without any judging or editorializing. Put in terms of Gibb’s categories, it uses descriptive rather than evaluative language. Notice the difference between a behavioral description and an evaluative judgment:

   - **Behavioral description:** “You asked me to tell you what I really thought about your idea, and then when I gave it to you, you told me I was too critical.”
   - **Evaluative judgment:** “Don’t be so touchy! It’s hypocritical to ask for my opinion and then get mad when I give it to you.”

   Judgmental words like “touchy” and “hypocritical” invite a defensive reaction. The target of your accusation can reply “I’m not touchy or hypocritical!” It’s harder to argue with the facts stated in an objective, behavioral description. Furthermore, the neutral language reduces the chances of a defensive reaction.

2. **Your Interpretation of the Other Person’s Behavior**  After describing the behavior in question, an assertive message expresses the communicator’s interpretation. This is where you can use the perception checking skill out-
lined in Chapter 2 (pages 46–48). Remember that a complete perception check includes two possible interpretations of the behavior:

- **Interpretation A:** “Maybe you reacted defensively because my criticism sounded too detailed—because my standards seemed too high.”
- **Interpretation B:** “Your reaction made me think that you really didn’t want to know my opinion: You were just fishing for a compliment when you asked my opinion.”

Whether you offer two interpretations (as in the previous list) or just one (as in the examples that follow), the key is to label your hunches as such instead of suggesting that you are positive about what the other person’s behavior means.

**3. A DESCRIPTION OF YOUR FEELINGS** Expressing your feelings adds a new dimension to a message. For example, consider the difference between these two responses:

- “When you kiss me and nibble on my ear while we’re watching television [behavior], I think you probably want to make love [interpretation], and I feel excited.”
- “When you kiss me and nibble on my ear while we’re watching television [behavior], I think you probably want to make love [interpretation], and I feel disgusted.”

Likewise, adding feelings to the situation we have been examining makes the assertive message more clear:

- “When you said I was too critical after you asked me for my honest opinion [behavior], it seemed to me that you really didn’t want to hear a critical remark [interpretation], and I felt stupid for being honest [feeling].”

**4. A DESCRIPTION OF THE CONSEQUENCES** A consequence statement explains what happens as a result of the behavior you have described, your interpretation, and the ensuing feeling. There are three kinds of consequences:

- **What happens to you, the speaker:**
  “When you forgot to give me the phone message yesterday [behavior], I didn’t know that my doctor’s appointment was delayed, and I wound up sitting in the office for an hour when I could have been studying or working [consequences]. It seems to me that you don’t care enough about how busy I am to even write a simple note [interpretation], and that’s why I got so mad. [feeling].”
  “I appreciate [feeling] the help you’ve given me on my term paper [behavior]. It tells me you think I’m on the right track [interpretation], and this gives me a boost to keep working on the idea [consequences].”

- **What happens to the person you’re addressing:**
  “When you have four or five drinks at a party after I’ve warned you to slow down [behavior], you start to act strange: You make crude jokes that offend everybody, and on the way home you drive poorly [consequences]. I don’t think you realize how differently you act [interpretation], and I’m worried [feeling] about what will happen if you don’t drink less.”

- **What happens to others:**
  “You probably don’t know because you couldn’t hear her cry [interpretation], but when you rehearse your lines for the play without closing the doors [behavior], the baby can’t sleep [consequence]. I’m especially concerned [feeling] about her because she’s had a cold lately.”
“I thought you’d want to know [interpretation] that when you kid Bob about his height [behavior], he gets embarrassed [feeling] and usually quiets down or leaves [consequences].”

A consequence statement for our ongoing example might sound like this:

- “When you said I was too critical after you asked me for my honest opinion [behavior], it seemed to me that you really didn’t want to hear a critical remark [interpretation]. I felt stupid for being honest [feeling]. Now I’m not sure whether I should tell you what I’m really thinking the next time you ask [consequence].”

5. A STATEMENT OF YOUR INTENTIONS  Intention statements are the final element in the assertive format. They can communicate three kinds of messages:

- Where you stand on an issue:

  “When you call us ‘girls’ after I’ve told you we want to be called ‘women’ [behavior], I get the idea you don’t appreciate how important the difference is to us [interpretation] and how demeaning it feels [feeling]. Now I’m in an awkward spot: Either I have to keep bringing the subject up, or else drop it and feel bad [consequence]. I want you to know how much this bothers me [intention].”

  “I’m really grateful [feeling] to you for speaking up for me in front of the boss yesterday [behavior]. That must have taken a lot of courage [interpretation]. Knowing that you’re behind me gives me a lot of confidence [consequence], and I want you to know how much I appreciate your support [intention].”

- Requests of others:

  “When you didn’t call last night [behavior] I thought you were mad at me [interpretation]. I’ve been thinking about it ever since [consequence], and I’m still worried [feeling]. I’d like to know whether you are angry [intention].”

  “I really enjoyed [feeling] your visit [behavior], and I’m glad you had a good time, too [interpretation]. I hope you’ll come again [intention].”

- Descriptions of how you plan to act in the future:

  “I’ve asked you to repay the twenty-five dollars I lent you three times now [behavior]. I’m getting the idea that you’ve been avoiding me [interpretation], and I’m pretty angry about it [feeling]. I want you to know that unless we clear this up now, you shouldn’t expect me ever to lend you anything again [intention].”

Why is it so important to make your intentions clear? Because failing to do so often makes it hard for others to know what you want from them or how to act. Consider how confusing the following statements are because they lack a clear statement of intention.

- “Thanks for the invitation, but I really should study Saturday night.” (Does the speaker want to be asked out again, or is he indirectly suggesting that he doesn’t ever want to go out with you?)

- “To tell you the truth, I was asleep when you came by, but I should have been up anyway.” (Is the speaker saying that it’s okay to come by in the future, or is she hinting that she doesn’t appreciate unannounced visitors?)

You can see from these examples that it’s often hard to make a clear interpretation of another person’s ideas without a direct statement of intention. Notice how much more direct statements become when the speakers make their position clear.
“Thanks for the invitation, but I really should study Saturday night. I hope you’ll ask me again soon.”

“Tell you the truth, I was asleep when you came by, but I should have been up anyway. Maybe the next time you should phone before dropping in so I’ll be sure to be awake.”

In our ongoing example, adding an intention statement would complete the assertive message:

“When you said I was too critical after you asked me for my honest opinion [behavior], it seemed to me that you really didn’t want to hear a critical remark [interpretation]. That made me feel stupid for being honest [feeling]. Now I’m not sure whether I should tell you what I’m really thinking the next time you ask [consequence]. I’d like to get it clear right now: Do you really want me to tell you what I think or not [intention]?"

Before you try to deliver messages using the assertive format outlined here, there are a few points to remember. First, it isn’t necessary or even wise always to put the elements in the order described here. As you can see from reviewing the examples on the preceding pages, it’s sometimes best to begin by stating your feelings. In other cases, you can start by sharing your intentions or interpretations or by describing consequences.

You also ought to word your message in a way that suits your style of speaking. Instead of saying, “I interpret your behavior to mean,” you might choose to say, “I think...” or “It seems to me...” or perhaps “I get the idea...” In the same way, you can express your intentions by saying, “I hope you’ll understand (or do)...” or perhaps “I wish you would...”. It’s important that you get your message across, but you should do it in a way that sounds and feels genuine to you.

Realize that there are some cases in which you can combine two elements in a single phrase. For instance, the statement “...and ever since then I’ve been wanting to talk to you” expresses both a consequence and an intention. In the same way, saying, “...and after you said that, I felt confused” expresses a consequence and a feeling. Whether you combine elements or state them separately, the important point is to be sure that each one is present in your statement.

Finally, you need to realize that it isn’t always possible to deliver messages such as the ones here all at one time, wrapped up in neat paragraphs. It will often be necessary to repeat or restate one part many times before your receiver truly understands what you’re saying. As you’ve already read, there are many types of psychological and physical noise that make it difficult for us to understand each other. Just remember: You haven’t communicated successfully until the receiver of your message understands everything you’ve said. In communication, as in many other activities, patience and persistence are essential.

**Gender and Conflict Style**

While the “Men are from Mars, women are from Venus” theory of gender doesn’t hold up under scrutiny, men and women often approach conflicts differently. Even in childhood, males are more likely to be overtly aggressive, demanding, and competitive, whereas females are more cooperative, or at least less directly aggressive. Studies of children from preschool to early adolescence have shown that boys typically try to get their way by ordering one another around: “Lie down.” “Get off my steps.” “Gimme your arm.” By contrast, girls are more likely to make proposals for action, beginning with the word “Let’s.” “Let’s go find some.” “Let’s ask her.”
you have any bottles?’” Let’s move those out first.” Whereas boys tell each other what role to take in pretend play (“Come on, be a doctor”), girls more commonly ask each other what role they want (“Will you be the patient for a few minutes?”) or make a joint proposal (“We can both be doctors”). Furthermore, boys often make demands without offering an explanation (“Look, I want the wire cutters right now”). By contrast, girls often give reasons for their suggestions (“We gotta clean ‘em first . . . ’cause they got germs”). When girls do have conflicts and disagreements, they are more likely to handle them via indirect aggression such as excluding someone from peer groups and complaining to others. Gender isn’t the only variable that determines how children will handle conflict. For example, girls are more likely to assert themselves with boys when their friends are also present.

Differences like these often persist into adulthood. One survey of college students revealed that men and women viewed conflicts in contrasting ways. Regardless of their cultural background, female students described men as being concerned with power and more interested in content than relational issues. Phrases used to describe male conflict styles included “The most important thing to males in conflict is their egos”; “Men don’t worry about feelings”; “Men are more direct.” By contrast, women were described as being more concerned with maintaining the relationship during a conflict. Phrases used to describe female conflict styles included “Women are better listeners”; “Women try to solve problems without controlling the other person”; and “Females are more concerned with others’ feelings.”

Research confirms some of these reports. Limited evidence suggests that women are more likely than men to use indirect strategies instead of confronting conflict head-on. They are also more likely to compromise and give in to maintain relational harmony. Men, by contrast, are more likely to use aggression to get their way.
After a relational conflict begins, men are often more likely than women to withdraw if they become uncomfortable or fail to get their way. The reason why men tend to avoid and women assert may have little to do with gender stereotypes. Women may demand more from their partners because historically they have had more to gain by complaining. In many cases, women make more demands because they have more to gain by doing so. When men benefit from the status quo, they protect their situation by withdrawing. To understand this “demand-withdraw” dynamic, consider a stereotypical housekeeping situation in which the woman complains because the man doesn’t do his share. Speaking up has the potential to change the woman’s plight for the better, whereas avoiding the discussion enables the man to maintain his situation.

Differences like these don’t mean that men are incapable of forming good relationships. Instead, the stereotypical male notion of what a good relationship is differs from the stereotypical female notion. For some men, friendship and aggression aren’t mutually exclusive. In fact, many strong male relationships are built around competition—at work or in athletics, for example. Women can be competitive, too, but they also are more likely to use logical reasoning and bargaining than aggression. When men communicate with women, they become less aggressive and more cooperative than they are in all-male groups.

Most theorists suggest that the primary reason for differences in conflict style is socialization. Some social scientists have proposed that a “threshold of assertiveness” may exist for people, especially women, allowing them to behave in an assertive way up to a point, but no further. Because women have been typically perceived as more compliant and cooperative, they may have seen themselves as reaching this threshold sooner than men, at which time they would back off. Because men have been expected to be more assertive—or even aggressive—they find it more comfortable to persist in seeking to meet their needs. As sex-role stereotyping becomes less common, it is likely that the differences between male and female conflict styles may become smaller.

Cultural Influences on Conflict

The ways in which people communicate during conflicts vary widely from one culture to another. The kind of rational, straight-talking, calm yet assertive approach that characterizes Euro-American disagreements is not the norm in other cultures. For example, in traditional African-American culture, conflict is characterized by a greater tolerance for expressions of intense emotions than is the rational, calm model taught in mainstream U.S. culture. Ethnicity isn’t the only factor that shapes a communicator’s preferred conflict style. The degree of assimilation also plays an important role. For example, Latino Americans with strong cultural identities tend to seek accommodation and compromise more than those with weaker cultural ties.

Not surprisingly, people from different regions often manage conflict quite differently. In individualistic cultures like that of the United States, the goals, rights, and needs of each person are considered important, and most people would agree that it is an individual’s right to stand up for himself or herself. By contrast, collectivist cultures (more common in Latin America and Asia) consider the concerns of the group to be more important than those of any individual. In these cultures, the kind of assertive behavior that might seem perfectly appropriate to a North American would seem rude and insensitive.
Another factor that distinguishes the assertiveness that is so valued by North Americans and northern Europeans from other cultures is the difference between high- and low-context cultural styles. Low-context cultures like that of the United States place a premium on being direct and literal. By contrast, high-context cultures like that of Japan value self-restraint and avoid confrontation. Communicators in these cultures derive meaning from a variety of unspoken rules, such as the context, social conventions, and hints. Preserving and honoring the face of the other person are prime goals, and communicators go to great lengths to avoid any communication that might risk embarrassing a conversational partner. For this reason, what seems like “beating around the bush” to an American would be polite to an Asian. In Japan, for example, even a simple request like “close the door” would be too straightforward. A more indirect statement like “it is somewhat cold today” would be more appropriate. To take a more important example, Japanese are reluctant to simply say “no” to a request. A more likely answer would be “Let me think about it for a while,” which anyone familiar with Japanese culture would recognize as a refusal. When indirect communication is a cultural norm, it is unreasonable to expect more straightforward approaches to succeed.

It isn’t necessary to look at Eastern cultures to encounter cultural differences in conflict. The style of some other familiar cultures differs in important ways from the northern European and North American norm. These cultures see verbal disputes as a form of intimacy and even a game. Americans visiting Greece, for example, often think they are witnessing an argument when they are overhearing a friendly conversation. A comparative study of American and Italian nursery school children showed that one of the Italian children’s favorite pastimes was a kind of heated debating that Italians call discusione, which Americans would regard as arguing. Likewise, research has shown that working-class Jewish speakers of eastern European origin used arguments as a means of being sociable.

Within the United States, the ethnic background of communicators also plays a role in their ideas about conflict. When African-American, Mexican-American, and white American college students were asked about their views regarding conflict, some important differences emerged. For example, white Americans seem more willing to accept conflict as a natural part of relationships, whereas Mexican Americans describe the short- and long-term dangers of disagreeing. Whites’ willingness to experience conflicts may be part of their individualistic, low-context communication style of speaking directly and avoiding uncertainty. It’s not surprising that people from more collective, high-context cultures that emphasize harmony among people with close relationships tend to handle conflicts in less direct ways. With differences like these, it’s easy to imagine how two friends, lovers, or fellow workers from different cultural backgrounds might have trouble finding a conflict style that is comfortable for them both.

The preceding section made it clear that conflict styles are shaped by social and cultural influences. Choose a conflict style different from yours—by virtue of gender or culture—and identify the assumptions on which it is based. Next, suggest how people with different styles can adapt their assumptions and behaviors to communicate in a more satisfying manner.
Methods of Conflict Resolution

No matter what the relational style, gender, or culture of the participants, every conflict is a struggle to have one’s goals met. Sometimes that struggle succeeds, and at other times it fails. In the remainder of this chapter we’ll look at various approaches to resolving conflicts and see which ones are most promising.

WIN–LOSE  Win–lose conflicts are ones in which one party achieves its goal at the expense of the other. People resort to this method of resolving disputes when they perceive a situation as being an “either–or” one: Either I get what I want, or you get your way. The most clear-cut examples of win–lose situations are certain games, such as baseball or poker, in which the rules require a winner and a loser. Some interpersonal issues seem to fit into this win–lose framework: two coworkers seeking a promotion to the same job, for instance, or a couple who disagree on how to spend their limited money.

Power is the distinguishing characteristic in win–lose problem solving, because it is necessary to defeat an opponent to get what you want. The most obvious kind of power is physical. Some parents threaten their children with warnings such as “Stop misbehaving, or I’ll send you to your room.” Adults who use physical power to deal with each other usually aren’t so blunt, but the legal system is the implied threat: “Follow the rules, or we’ll lock you up.”
Real or implied force isn’t the only kind of power used in conflicts. People who rely on authority of many types engage in win–lose methods without ever threatening physical coercion. In most jobs, supervisors have the potential to use authority in the assignment of working hours, job promotions, desirable or undesirable tasks and, of course, in the power to fire an unsatisfactory employee. Teachers can use the power of grades to coerce students to act in desired ways.

Even the usually admired democratic principle of majority rule is a win–lose method of resolving conflicts. However fair it may be, this system results in one group’s getting its way and another group’s being unsatisfied.

There are some circumstances when win–lose problem solving may be necessary, such as when there are truly scarce resources and where only one party can achieve satisfaction. For instance, if two suitors want to marry the same person, only one can succeed. And to return to an earlier example, it’s often true that only one applicant can be hired for a job. But don’t be too willing to assume that your conflicts are necessarily win–lose: As you’ll soon read, many situations that seem to require a loser can be resolved to everyone’s satisfaction.

There is a second kind of situation when win–lose is the best method. Even when cooperation is possible, if the other person insists on trying to defeat you, then the most logical response might be to defend yourself by fighting back. “It takes two to tango,” the old cliché goes, and it also often takes two to cooperate.

A final and much less frequent justification for trying to defeat another person occurs when the other person is clearly behaving in a wrong manner and when defeating that person is the only way to stop the wrongful behavior. Few people would deny the importance of restraining a person who is deliberately harming others even if the aggressor’s freedom is sacrificed in the process. Forcing wrongdoers to behave themselves is dangerous because of the wide difference in opinion between people about who is wrong and who is right. Given this difference, it would seem justifiable to coerce others into behaving as we think they should only in the most extreme circumstances.

**LOSE–LOSE**  In lose–lose problem solving, neither side is satisfied with the outcome. Although the name of this approach is so discouraging that it’s hard to imagine how anyone could willingly use it, in truth lose–lose is a fairly common way to handle conflicts. In many instances the parties will both strive to be winners, but as a result of the struggle, both end up losers. On the international scene many wars illustrate this sad point. A nation that gains military victory at the cost of thousands of lives, large amounts of resources, and a damaged national consciousness hasn’t truly won much. On an interpersonal level the same principle holds true. Most of us have seen battles of pride in which both parties strike out and both suffer.

**COMPROMISE**  Unlike lose–lose outcomes, a compromise gives both parties at least some of what they wanted, though both sacrifice part of their goals. People usually settle for compromises when they see partial satisfaction as the best they can hope for. Although a compromise may be better than losing everything, this approach hardly seems to deserve the positive image it has with some people. In his valuable book on conflict resolution, management consultant Albert Filley makes an interesting observation about our attitudes toward this approach. "Why is it," he asks, "that if someone says, ‘I will compromise my values,’ we view the action unfavorably, yet we talk admiringly about parties in a con-
flict who compromise to reach a solution? Although compromises may be the best obtainable result in some conflicts, it’s important to realize that both people in a dispute can often work together to find much better solutions. In such cases *compromise* is a negative word.

Most of us are surrounded by the results of bad compromises. Consider a common example: the conflict between one person’s desire to smoke cigarettes and another’s need to breathe clean air. The win–lose outcomes of this conflict are obvious: Either the smoker abstains, or the nonsmoker gets polluted lungs—neither very satisfying. But a compromise in which the smoker gets to enjoy only a rare cigarette or must retreat outdoors and in which the nonsmoker still must inhale some fumes or feel like an ogre is hardly better. Both sides have lost a considerable amount of both comfort and goodwill. Of course, the costs involved in other compromises are even greater. For example, if a divorced couple compromise on child care by haggling over custody and then finally grudgingly agree to split the time with their children, it’s hard to say that anybody has won.

**WIN–WIN** In *win–win problem solving*, the goal is to find a solution that satisfies the needs of everyone involved. Not only do the parties avoid trying to win at the other’s expense, but also they believe that by working together it is possible to find a solution that allows both to reach their goals.
Some compromises approach this win–win ideal. You and the seller might settle on a price for a used car that is between what the seller was asking and what you wanted to pay. Although neither of you got everything you wanted, the outcome would still leave both of you satisfied. Likewise, you and your companion might agree to see a film that is the second choice for both of you in order to spend an evening together. As long as everyone is satisfied with an outcome, it’s accurate to describe it as a win–win solution.

Although compromises can be a type of win–win outcome, the best solutions are ones in which all the parties get everything they want. Although a win–win approach sounds ideal, it is not always possible, or even appropriate. Table 7–4 suggests some factors to consider when deciding which approach to take when facing a conflict. There will certainly be times when compromising is the most sensible approach. You will even encounter instances when pushing for your own solution is reasonable. Even more surprisingly, you will probably discover that there are times when it makes sense to willingly accept the loser’s role.

**Steps in Win–Win Problem Solving**

Although win–win problem solving is often the most desirable approach to managing conflicts, it is also one of the hardest to achieve. In spite of the challenge, it is definitely possible to become better at resolving conflicts. The following pages outline a method to increase your chances of being able to handle your conflicts in a win–win manner, so that both you and others have your needs met. As you learn to use this approach, you should find that more and more of your conflicts end up with win–win solutions. And even when total satisfaction isn’t possible, this approach can preserve a positive relational climate.

As it is presented here, win–win problem solving is a highly structured activity. After you have practiced the approach a number of times, this style of managing conflict will become almost second nature to you. You’ll then be able to approach your conflicts without the need to follow the step-by-step approach. But for the
time being, try to be patient, and trust the value of the following pattern. As you read on, imagine yourself applying it to a problem that’s bothering you now.

**IDENTIFY YOUR PROBLEM AND UNMET NEEDS**  Before you speak out, it’s important to realize that the problem that is causing conflict is yours. Whether you want to return an unsatisfactory piece of merchandise, complain to noisy neighbors because your sleep is being disturbed, or request a change in working conditions from your employer, the problem is yours. Why? Because in each case you are the person who is dissatisfied. You are the one who has paid for the defective article; the merchant who sold it to you has the use of your good money. You are the one who is losing sleep as a result of your neighbors’ activities; they are content to go on as before. You, not your boss, are the one who is unhappy with your working conditions.

Realizing that the problem is yours will make a big difference when the time comes to approach your partner. Instead of feeling and acting in an evaluative way, you’ll be more likely to share your problem in a descriptive way, which will not only be more accurate but also will reduce the chance of a defensive reaction.

After you realize that the problem is yours, the next step is to identify the unmet needs that leave you feeling dissatisfied. Sometimes a relational need underlies the content of the issue at hand. Consider these cases:

- A friend hasn’t returned some money you lent long ago. Your apparent need in this situation might be to get the cash back. But a little thought will probably show that this isn’t the only, or even the main, thing you want. Even if you were rolling in money, you’d probably want the loan repaid because of your most important need: to avoid feeling victimized by your friend’s taking advantage of you.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 7-4 Choosing the Most Appropriate Method of Conflict Resolution</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>1. Consider deferring to the other person:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>- When you discover you are wrong</td>
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<td>- When the issue is more important to the other person than it is to you</td>
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<tr>
<td>- To let others learn by making their own mistakes</td>
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<td>- When the long-term cost of winning may not be worth the short-term gains</td>
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<td><strong>2. Consider compromising:</strong></td>
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<td>- When there is not enough time to seek a win–win outcome</td>
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<tr>
<td>- When the issue is not important enough to negotiate at length</td>
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<td>- When the other person is not willing to seek a win–win outcome</td>
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<td><strong>3. Consider competing:</strong></td>
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<td>- When the issue is important and the other person will take advantage of your noncompetitive approach</td>
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<td><strong>4. Consider cooperating:</strong></td>
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<td>- When the issue is too important for a compromise</td>
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<td>- When a long-term relationship between you and the other person is important</td>
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<tr>
<td>- When the other person is willing to cooperate</td>
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Someone you care about who lives in a distant city has failed to respond to several letters. Your apparent need may be to get answers to the questions you’ve written about, but it’s likely that there’s another, more fundamental need: the reassurance that you’re still important enough to deserve a response.

As you’ll soon see, the ability to identify your real needs plays a key role in solving interpersonal problems. For now, the point to remember is that before you voice your problem to your partner, you ought to be clear about which of your needs aren’t being met.

MAKE A DATE Unconstructive fights often start because the initiator confronts a partner who isn’t ready. There are many times when a person isn’t in the right frame of mind to face a conflict: perhaps owing to fatigue, being in too much of a hurry to take the necessary time, upset over another problem, or not feeling well. At times like these, it’s unfair to “jump” a person without notice and expect to get full attention for your problem. If you do persist, you’ll probably have an ugly fight on your hands.

After you have a clear idea of the problem, approach your partner with a request to try to solve it. For example: “Something’s been bothering me. Can we talk about it?” If the answer is “yes”, then you’re ready to go further. If it isn’t the right time to confront your partner, find a time that’s agreeable to both of you.

DESCRIBE YOUR PROBLEM AND NEEDS Your partner can’t possibly meet your needs without knowing why you’re upset and what you want. Therefore, it’s up to you to describe your problem as specifically as possible. When you do so, it’s important to use terms that aren’t overly vague or abstract. Recall our discussion of behavioral descriptions in Chapter 3 when clarifying your problem and needs.

PARTNER CHECKS BACK After you’ve shared your problem and described what you need, it’s important to make sure that your partner has understood what you’ve said. As you can remember from the discussion of listening in Chapter 4, there’s a good chance—especially in a stressful conflict situation—of your words being misinterpreted.

It’s usually unrealistic to insist that your partner paraphrase your problem statement, and fortunately there are more tactful and subtle ways to make sure you’ve been understood. For instance, you might try saying, “I’m not sure I expressed myself very well just now—maybe you should tell me what you heard me say so I can be sure I got it right.” In any case, be absolutely sure that your partner understands your whole message before going any further. Legitimate agreements are tough enough, but there’s no point in getting upset about a conflict that doesn’t even exist.

SOLICIT PARTNER’S NEEDS After you’ve made your position clear, it’s time to find out what your partner needs in order to feel satisfied about this issue. There are two reasons why it’s important to discover your partner’s needs. First, it’s fair. After all, the other person has just as much right as you to feel satisfied, and if you expect help in meeting your needs, then it’s reasonable that you behave in the same way. Second, just as an unhappy partner will make it hard for you to become satisfied, a happy one will be more likely to cooperate in letting you reach
your goals. Thus, it is in your own self-interest to discover and meet your partner’s needs.

You can learn about your partner’s needs simply by asking about them: “Now I’ve told you what I want and why. Tell me what you need to feel okay about this.” After your partner begins to talk, your job is to use the listening skills discussed earlier in this book to make sure you understand.

**CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING OF PARTNER’S NEEDS** Paraphrase or ask questions about your partner’s needs until you’re certain you understand them. The surest way to accomplish this is to use the paraphrasing skills you learned in Chapter 4.

**NEGOTIATE A SOLUTION** Now that you and your partner understand each other’s needs, the goal becomes finding a way to meet them. This is done by trying to develop as many potential solutions as possible and then evaluating them to decide which one best meets the needs of both. The following steps can help communicators develop a mutually satisfying solution.

1. **Identify and Define the Conflict.** We’ve discussed this process in the preceding pages. It consists of discovering each person’s problem and needs, setting the stage for meeting all of them.

2. **Generate a Number of Possible Solutions.** In this step the partners work together to think of as many means as possible to reach their stated ends. The key word here is *quantity*: It’s important to generate as many ideas as you can think of without worrying about which ones are good or bad. Write down every thought that comes up, no matter how unworkable; sometimes a far-fetched idea will lead to a more workable one.

3. **Evaluate the Alternative Solutions.** This is the time to talk about which solutions will work and which ones won’t. It’s important for all concerned to be honest about their willingness to accept an idea. If a solution is going to work, everyone involved has to support it.

4. **Decide on the Best Solution.** Now that you’ve looked at all the alternatives, pick the one that looks best to everyone. It’s important to be sure everybody understands the solution and is willing to try it out. Remember: Your decision doesn’t have to be final, but it should look potentially successful.

**FOLLOW UP ON THE SOLUTION** You can’t be sure the solution will work until you try it out. After you’ve tested it for a while, it’s a good idea to set aside some time to talk over how things are going. You may find that you need to make some changes or even rethink the whole problem. The idea is to keep on top of the problem, to keep using creativity to solve it.

Win-win solutions aren’t always possible. There will be times when even the best-intentioned people simply won’t be able to find a way of meeting all their needs. In cases like this, the process of negotiation has to include some compromising. But even then the preceding steps haven’t been wasted. The genuine desire to learn what the other person wants and to try to satisfy those desires will build a climate of goodwill that can help you find the best solution to the present problem and also improve your relationship in the future.

One typical comment people have after trying the preceding method of handling conflicts is “This is a helpful thing sometimes, but it’s so rational! Sometimes I’m
so uptight I don’t care about defensiveness or listening or anything . . . I just want to yell and get it off my chest!”

When you feel like this, it’s almost impossible to be rational. At times like these, probably the most therapeutic thing to do is to get your feelings off your chest in what Bach calls a “Vesuvius” — an uncontrolled, spontaneous explosion. A Vesuvius can be a terrific way of blowing off steam, and after you do so, it’s often much easier to figure out a rational solution to your problem.

So we encourage you to have a Vesuvius with the following qualifications: Be sure your partner understands what you’re doing and realizes that whatever you say doesn’t call for a response. He or she should let you rant and rave for as long as you want without getting defensive or “tying in.” Then, when your eruption subsides, you can take steps to work through whatever still troubles you.

### CULTURAL IDIOM

**uptight:** anxious

**get it off my chest:** talk about something that is worrying or upsetting one

**blowing off steam:** releasing excess energy or anger

#### SUMMARY

This chapter explored several factors that help make interpersonal relationships satisfying or unsatisfying. We began by defining *communication climate* as the emotional tone of a relationship as it is expressed in the messages being sent and received. We examined factors that contribute to positive and negative climates, learning that the underlying factor is the degree to which a person feels valued by others. We examined types of confirming and disconfirming messages, and then looked in detail at Gibb’s categories of defensiveness-arousing and supportive behaviors.

The second half of the chapter dealt with interpersonal conflict. We saw that conflict is a fact of life in every relationship and that the way conflicts are handled plays a major role in the quality of a relationship. There are five ways people can behave when faced with a conflict: nonassertive, directly aggressive, passive-aggressive, indirect, and assertive. Each of these approaches can be appropriate at times, but the chapter focused on assertive communication skills because of their value and novelty for most communicators. We saw that conflict styles are affected by both gender and culture.

There are four outcomes to conflicts: win–lose, lose–lose, compromise, and win–win. Win–win outcomes are often possible, if the parties possess the proper attitudes and skills. The final section of the chapter outlined the steps in win–win problem solving.

#### KEY TERMS

- assertion 239
- certainty 234
- communication climate 228
- compromise 248
- confirming response 229
- conflict 235
- controlling message 232
- crazymaking 238
- deescalatory conflict spiral 231
- descriptive communication 232
- direct aggression 238
- disconfirming response 229
- empathy 234
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- evaluative communication 232
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- “I” language 232
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- problem orientation 233
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- spiral 231
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- strategy 233
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- win–lose conflicts 247
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- “you” language 232
ACTIVITIES

1. Your Confirming and Disconfirming Messages
   You can gain an understanding of how confirming and disconfirming messages create communication spirals by trying the following exercise.
   1. Identify the communication climate of an important personal relationship. Using weather metaphors (sunny, gloomy, calm) may help.
   2. Describe several confirming or disconfirming messages that have helped create and maintain the climate. Be sure to identify both verbal and nonverbal messages.
   3. Show how the messages you have identified have created either escalatory or deescalatory conflict spirals. Describe how these spirals reach limits and what events cause them to stabilize or reverse.
   4. Describe what you can do to either maintain the existing climate (if positive) or change it (if negative). Again, list both verbal and nonverbal behaviors.

2. Constructing Supportive Messages
   This exercise will give you practice in sending confirming messages that exhibit Gibb’s categories of supportive behavior. You will find that you can communicate in a constructive way—even in conflict situations.
   1. Begin by recalling at least two situations in which you found yourself in an escalatory conflict spiral.
   2. Using the Gibb categories, identify your defense-arousing messages, both verbal and nonverbal.
   3. Now reconstruct the situations, writing a script in which you replace the defense-arousing behaviors with the supportive alternatives outlined by Gibb.
   4. If it seems appropriate, you may choose to approach the other people in each of the situations you have described here and attempt to replay the exchange. Otherwise, describe how you could use the supportive approach you developed in Step 3 in future exchanges.

3. Constructing Assertive Messages
   Develop your skill at expressing assertive messages by composing responses for each of the following situations:
   1. A neighbor’s barking dog is keeping you awake at night.
   2. A friend hasn’t repaid the twenty dollars she borrowed two weeks ago.
   3. Your boss made what sounded like a sarcastic remark about the way you put school before work.
   4. An out-of-town friend phones at the last minute to cancel the weekend you planned to spend together.

Now develop two assertive messages you could send to a real person in your life. Discuss how you could express these messages in a way that is appropriate for the situation and that fits your personal style.

4. Problem Solving in Your Life
   1. Recall as many conflicts as possible that you have had in one relationship. Identify which approach best characterizes each one: win–lose, lose–lose, compromise, or win–win.
   2. For each conflict, describe the consequences (for both you and the other person) of this approach.
   3. Based on your analysis, decide for yourself how successful you and your partner are at managing conflicts. Describe any differences in approach that would result in more satisfying outcomes. Discuss what steps you and your partner could take to make these changes.

FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

Print Resources

For a more detailed list of readings about improving interpersonal relationships, see the CD-ROM that came with this book, and the Understanding Human Communication Web site at www.oup.com/us/uhc.


This book focuses specifically on the nature of skills that contribute to effective communication. Chapters address topics such as managing conversations, impression management, arguing, and persuasion. Selected chapters also focus on specific types of interpersonal relationships including romantic partners and spouses, friends, parents and children, people from different cultures, and in health care.

A thorough survey of the nature of interpersonal conflict and how it can be resolved. This is an ideal second step for readers who want to explore the subject in further detail.


Leading scholars contribute chapters to fundamental issues that involve better relationships including conflict, the role of emotions, culture, personality, and interpersonal influence.


Kohn offers extensive evidence suggesting that competition is inherently destructive, both in society at large and in personal relationships. He goes on to demonstrate how cooperation can make people happier, more productive, and secure.


This outstanding book was developed by members of the famous Harvard Negotiation Project. It offers a comprehensive, readable, and (most importantly) effective approach to understanding the potential dangers of unproductive conflicts and how to avoid them. Examples are drawn from a variety of contexts, including work, family, and friendships.


Sociolinguist Tannen argues (note the combative metaphor) that our culture is suffused with an orientation toward combat that often pushes personal relationships away from cooperation and toward conflict. She offers examples from areas such as the media, politics, and law to support her points. Tannen also profiles other cultures with more collaborative approaches toward managing differences.

**Feature Films**

For descriptions of each film below and descriptions of other movies that illustrate interpersonal relationships, see the CD-ROM that came with this book, and the *Understanding Human Communication* Web site at www.oup.com/us/uhc.

**Confirming and Disconfirming Behavior**


A shipboard fight lands sailor Antwone Fisher (Derek Luke) in the office of base psychiatrist Jerome Davenport (Denzel Washington). After several sessions of stubborn silence, Antwone reveals that he was abandoned at birth by his imprisoned mother. He also never knew his father, who was murdered two months before he was born. Raised by a cruel foster family, Antwone feels rootless and angry at the world. Davenport becomes a father figure to Antwone, assuring him of his value.

The film, based on a true story, is a powerful example of how being ignored is the ultimate form of disconfirmation. The ending offers hope for turning around a tough life through the confirmation and love of people who care.

*Stolen Summer* (2002). Rated PG.

Second-grader Pete O’Malley (Adi Stein) is worried about getting into heaven. His parochial school upbringing (and some advice from his brother) convinces him that he needs to help Jews believe in Jesus to save their souls, which in turn will ensure his own salvation. As a result, he sets up a lemonade stand in front of a local synagogue with the goal of spreading the gospel.

It’s easy to see how Rabbi Jacobson (Keven Pollak) could become defensive at such proselytizing. Instead, he treats Pete and his mission with dignity and respect, and the two of them engage in a series of open-minded dialogues. The supportive communication climate they create together allows them to exchange differing ideas without feeling threatened. In contrast, Pete’s father, Joe O’Malley (Aidan Quinn), gets quite defensive when he imagines that Rabbi Jacobson is condescending to him.

By movie’s end, Joe and the rest of the characters learn some important lessons about breaking down religious barriers and communicating supportively in the midst of differences.
**Dysfunctional Conflict**


To outsiders, Lester and Carolyn Burnham (Kevin Spacey and Annette Bening) look like the perfect couple: attractive, with good jobs and an immaculate suburban home. But we soon learn that life isn’t as good as it seems. The Burnhams’ relationship with their daughter Jane (Thora Birch) is superficial. Carolyn is in denial about Lester’s crisis, and she ignores his pleas to recapture their lost love. As the film relentlessly moves toward a stunning conclusion, we are presented with a portrait of American family members who alternate between avoidance and aggression without demonstrating any apparent skill at managing the serious conflicts that face them.


*The War of the Roses* was billed as a black comedy, but there is little to laugh about in this grim story. Oliver and Barbara Rose (Michael Douglas and Kathleen Turner) are a couple whose “perfect marriage” falls apart when they encounter their respective midlife crises. Their decision to divorce is not nearly as depressing as their escalating hostility: Oliver and Barbara would rather die than sacrifice either their egos or their possessions.

The Roses’ battles soon escalate to the point of absurdity, but anyone who has seen the self-defeating lengths to which some people will go in a dysfunctional conflict will find the film’s theme sadly familiar. A civil divorce is hardly the goal to which any couple aspires, but after viewing the mutual destruction that arises from situations like the Roses’, couples who can handle their breakups decently seem as deserving of admiration as sympathy.

**Culture and Conflict**


*The Joy Luck Club* is not one story but many, told in film through flashbacks, narrations, and gripping portrayals. The primary stories involve four Chinese women and their daughters. The mothers all flee difficult situations in China to start new lives in the United States, where they raise their daughters with a mixture of Chinese and American styles. Many of the movie’s conflicts arise out of differing cultural values.

The mothers were raised in the high-context, collectivist environment of China, where open conflict is discouraged and individual needs (particularly of women) were submerged for the larger good. To achieve their goals, the mothers use a variety of indirect and passive-aggressive methods. Their daughters, raised in the United States, adopt a more low-context, direct form of communication. They are also more assertive and aggressive in their conflict styles, particularly when dealing with their mothers.

Several of the stories have happy endings. In fact, each woman in the movie takes a stand on an important issue in her life, and most of the outcomes are positive. The women in *The Joy Luck Club* learn to both embrace and reject aspects of their cultural heritage as they attempt to manage their conflicts effectively.