

## Middlebury College Document Delivery

ILLiad TN: 658224



**Journal Title:** The Dynamics of Conflict: A Guide to Engagement and Intervention

**ISSN:** 9780470613535



**Volume:**

**Issue:**

**Month/Year:** 2012

**Pages:** 3-32

**Article Author:** Bernard S. Mayer,

**Article Title:** Chapter 1 - The Nature of Conflict

**Imprint:** EBSCO:eBook Index:430947

**Deliver to Middlebury College Patron:**

- Save to C:/Ariel Scan as a PDF
- Run Odyssey Helper
- Switch to Process Type: Document Delivery
- Process
- Switch back to Lending before closing.

**Call #:** ILL Book "EEM"

**Location:** Hold Shelf

**Item #:**

Sarah Stroup (sstroup)  
Munroe Hall  
Middlebury, VT 05753

It is easy enough to say that conflict is inevitable and is not in itself good or bad, but for many people accepting this simple premise is an uphill battle. There may be an important lesson for us in the resistance that people have to acknowledging conflict in their lives. This may be something other than dysfunctional conflict avoidance. Perhaps there is an inevitable shift in the way people interact with each other once they acknowledge the presence of conflict, giving them good reason to approach that admission with caution. If this shift in focus, energy, attitude, or behavior is a natural consequence of the emergence of conflict, and if conflict is itself necessary, inevitable, and often healthy, this poses a fundamental dilemma for all of us. We had therefore better strive to comprehend the nature of conflict in all its complexities. Understanding conflict becomes the vehicle for understanding the many contradictions that are necessarily present in our efforts to be social beings. Understanding these contradictions is also essential to comprehending how we evolved as a species (Nowak, with Highfield, 2011).

Furthermore, something can almost always be done about conflict. This does not mean that it always can or should be resolved, but a productive response can usually move conflict in a more constructive direction. Sometimes this response may be to escalate a conflict so that it emerges into people's consciousness or takes on a higher priority for action. Sometimes the response may be to do nothing and let events develop, allowing the conflict to mature. Sometimes it may be to help people understand their needs and express their feelings at a deeper, more meaningful level. Sometimes it may be to find some Band-Aid to stop the bleeding. Sometimes it may be to look for creative solutions that all parties can accept. There is no single correct response to conflict, but that does not mean there are not wise and unwise responses to any particular conflict. Our success as individuals, communities, organizations, and societies is in no small measure related to our developing wisdom concerning how we can respond to the many conflicts we face.

## CHAPTER TWO

# HOW PEOPLE APPROACH CONFLICT

No two people approach conflict in exactly the same way. Furthermore, each of us handles conflict differently at different times, and our approach to conflict evolves over our lifetime. This seems obvious. What is less obvious, however, is how to characterize the complex and changing ways in which we respond to conflict and how each pair of people, or each group, develop their own style or pattern of conflict interaction—how they learn their conflict dance.

How we handle conflict is basic to our sense of ourselves, to how we try to make our way in life, and to how we relate to others. Our approach to conflict derives from what we have been taught about conflict, our experiences in conflict, our personality, culture, the nature of the conflicts we find ourselves in, and the roles we are playing. At any given time we tend to have very different approaches to how we handle conflict in our family, social life, and work life. We handle conflict differently when we are under stress, tired, anxious, or scared. Certain people evoke particular kinds of conflict responses from us, and we from them. Characterizing conflict styles is not so simple, and it is important to remember that system dynamics can be even more powerful than individual traits in determining how people respond to conflict.

We can also see patterns in how each of us approaches conflict, and it is often very helpful to try to understand these as we





approach our own conflicts or work with other people in conflict. In trying to understand a conflict, we need to look at both the individual patterns of behavior in conflict and the different styles of interaction that particular disputants establish with one another.

Many frameworks can be useful in understanding the differences in how individuals approach conflict. For example, it is often useful to look at individuals' past experiences with conflict, the way conflict was handled and their typical role in conflict in their family of origin, disputants' cultural norms and practices pertaining to conflict, a range of personality variables, and the particular skills they bring to the conflict. There are in fact so many potential variables to consider that we can easily be overwhelmed. The desire to focus on a simple categorization of conflict styles is understandable, but ultimately misleading. If we want to take a more dynamic and nuanced approach to understanding how people handle conflict, there are a number of factors we should consider. These are values and beliefs about conflict, how people explain conflict, approaches to avoiding and engaging in conflict, styles of conflict engagement, the roles people are drawn to play in conflict, and patterns of conflict interaction.

## VALUES AND BELIEFS

When we are involved in a conflict, we are often more focused on the values or beliefs that surround the issues involved in the conflict than on our values about conflict itself. But our approach to conflict may be heavily influenced and at times even determined by these core values concerning conflict, even though we are often unaware of them. Some of these beliefs are rooted in the culture in which we have been brought up and the era in which we have come of age. For example, challenging authority was relatively normative for those of us who grew up in the 1960s but less so for people who came of age in the 1950s. But even within a particular culture, or family for that matter, we find tremendous variation in individuals' specific beliefs about conflict. Our most important beliefs deal with our basic attitudes about conflict, how

people should behave in conflict, and what kinds of outcomes are possible or acceptable. Let's consider these three areas.

### WHAT ARE OUR BASIC ATTITUDES ABOUT CONFLICT?

One way to get at the range of attitudes that people hold about conflict is to consider some of the most common aphorisms about conflict. For example:

- "If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all."
- "If it isn't broken, don't fix it."
- "Don't look for trouble, it will find you by itself."
- "People in glass houses shouldn't throw stones." ("Let he who is without sin cast the first stone.")
- "Let sleeping dogs lie."

These and other similar expressions warn us against engaging in conflict or raising divisive issues. They even suggest that preventive action is unwise. The underlying message is that conflict is dangerous, usually a sign of dysfunction, and to be avoided. A more nuanced interpretation might be that we think twice before entering into conflict. The underlying tone of all these sayings, however, is that conflict should, if possible, be simply ignored, suppressed, or avoided. The prevalence of this kind of folk wisdom about communication and conflict reflects a widespread belief that conflict is dangerous and perhaps even immoral.

Conversely, consider these sayings:

- "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure."
- "A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step."
- "Barking dogs seldom bite."
- "You can't make an omelet without breaking eggs."
- "Conflict is inevitable. Combat is optional."

Each of these expressions suggests that it is better to act preventatively, to have the courage to engage in a difficult process, and to deal with feelings or concerns proactively. They also suggest that although conflict is inevitable, we have a role in determining



whether it is destructive or constructive, and that it is not conflict itself that we need to fear but how it is handled.

Our attitudes toward conflict are in part the result of how we balance our belief that conflict ought to be avoided with the recognition that avoidance is itself a major problem. How we achieve this balance depends, in part, on our ideas about the role that conflict plays in our lives. Many people believe that conflict is a natural part of their lives and that it is perfectly acceptable to be in conflict. In fact, some believe that if they are not engaged in some conflict they are not dealing with life's challenges and opportunities. For others, conflict is a sign of failure—of personal, organizational, or societal malfunction. How people go about raising potentially difficult issues with each other is often a direct manifestation of their attitudes toward conflict.

A related issue is whether we believe that there can be a conflict in which no one is wrong. ("It takes two to tango." "You're either part of the problem or part of the solution.") On the one hand, if we think that two individuals (or two societies) can have a major difference of opinion about an issue without either party's being wrong or bad, then it is easier for us to see conflict as acceptable and less threatening. If, on the other hand, we think that at least one party in any conflict must be wrong, then the existence of conflict is more likely to threaten our relationships. This belief also makes it difficult for disputants to think of anything short of complete victory as an acceptable outcome.

#### HOW SHOULD PEOPLE BEHAVE IN CONFLICT?

We also operate from a set of norms about how to behave in conflict. These are sometimes related to values about respect, violence, honesty, and transparency. Poker metaphors are very prevalent in the language people use to talk about conflict and negotiation ("up the ante," "bluff," "put your cards on the table," "go all in"). I see two important beliefs about conflict embedded in these metaphors. One is that conflict is a win-lose (zero sum) game. The other is that it takes cunning, deception, and even lying to be effective in conflict. I often ask students whether they consider it to be a lie when in a negotiation one party indicates that a certain price is a bottom line offer beyond which they cannot

go, when in reality it is not. Responses to this range from "It's not lying, it's bargaining" to "It's lying, but it's OK" to "That's why I hate to negotiate—because you have to lie." A related set of beliefs suggests that "the ends justify the means" or that "winning isn't everything—it's the only thing." Clearly one set of values urges us to be tough, decisive, even ruthless if we find ourselves in conflict.

But there is a different set of values that call for us to be open-minded, to acknowledge other points of view, to be fair, to see both sides of an issue, and to respect the humanity of those with whom we are in conflict. ("Turn the other cheek." "There is more than one way to skin a cat." "The truth shall set you free." "Don't judge a man until you have walked a mile in his shoes." "You catch more flies with honey than with vinegar." "It's better to give than to receive.") The implication here is that it is better to be nonreactive, nonjudgmental, polite, and open-minded.

How we bring to bear these often contradictory values in different conflict situations reflects our personal beliefs, but it is also influenced by the values of those with whom we are in conflict. It is a lot easier to buy into collaborative values and approaches when the other side shares them. But of course, this is frequently not the case. And there is something about the way conflict unfolds, even when we share collaborative values, that can bring out our most adversarial selves. Sometimes we have one set of beliefs about how we should behave and another set of beliefs about how others should act.

We also have values about many specific elements of conflict behavior—about forgiveness, apologies, direct dealing, how to use power, taking personal responsibility, assertiveness, disclosure and openness, and the appropriate balance between strength and kindness, to name a few. These and many other values that people have about how to behave in conflict are a complex and often contradictory mix. Everyone struggles at times with contending values. For example, many people value being fair-minded, trusting, sensitive, and accommodating, but at the same time most do not want to be naïve or weak. People want to be firm and flexible, optimistic and realistic, accommodating and tough. Sometimes these contradictory pulls are resolved as people work their way through a conflict, but often they constitute a major problem that interferes with disputants' ability to handle conflict in a measured,



consistent, and powerful way. This is an expression of the negotiator's dilemma, discussed further in Chapter Eight.

### IS CONFLICT SOLVABLE?

People have widely variable views about whether conflict can be solved and people can change. (For example, "You can't teach an old dog new tricks" and "A leopard cannot change its spots" versus "Everyone makes mistakes," "Pessimism is a self-fulfilling prophecy," and "Yes we can.") The more that we believe conflict is solvable, the more likely we are to aim for a full resolution of our differences, a genuine transformation of the conflict, and the restoration of a positive relationship. If we do not believe that significant conflict can be resolved or even made less toxic or that people can genuinely change as a result of experience, we are more likely to look for quick fixes, superficial solutions, or ways to circumvent the conflict.

### FLEXIBILITY OF VALUES

Some people have set and inflexible beliefs about conflict. Others have values that vary according to the particular conflict and its context. For example, many people have one set of values about conflict in their personal lives and another about social or organizational conflict. As a result, they often have completely different approaches to conflict in these different arenas. I may, for example, be very accommodating and easygoing in my approach to disagreements with my spouse but very confrontational and positional in how I approach disagreements about workplace conflicts.

People are often unaware of their own values about conflict, much less the values of others. Probably far more often than we realize, conflict behavior is as much motivated by disputants' values about conflict as by their desire to achieve a particular goal, as in the following case.

Perhaps I did not want to make a decision in this arbitration, but I found myself particularly frustrated by what appeared to be the self-destructive intransigence of one of the disputants. I was the chair of a panel that was hearing a case about a public housing

resident's potential eviction. Before the final decision was delivered, the housing authority made a settlement offer that appeared to meet the needs of the resident, but he declined it. I asked the resident what he did not like about the proposal. "My father lent me the money to go through this hearing," he told me, "and he would kill me if I wimped out now." He valued "hanging tough" in this conflict, particularly in front of his father, and that was his primary motivation for turning down an offer that he acknowledged was a good one, far better than the eventual (and fairly obvious) outcome of arbitration.

### HOW PEOPLE EXPLAIN CONFLICT

One revealing window into how people approach conflict is the narratives they construct to explain their disputes. For example, sometimes individuals explain a conflict in very personal terms, emphasizing the characters or personalities of the disputants. Other times they focus on the dispute's structural or systemic roots. Still other times some external force or entity (divine will, a malevolent manipulator, karma, the universe) is brought into the picture.

One interesting take on this examines how people explain why someone has acted in a way that they experience as harmful. Called attribution theory (Allred, 2000; Heider, 1958), the fundamental insight is that how we explain the causes of behavior has a major impact on how we respond to it. For example, if we are sitting in a restaurant waiting to meet someone who is late, we might believe that we are being stood up, that the other person is irresponsible, that she thinks her time is more important than ours, or that she does not particularly value our friendship. These are variations on what are referred to as dispositional (or internal) attributions, based on the personality or character of the other person. Alternatively, we might think that the person never got our message confirming the meeting, that she is stuck in a traffic jam, or that she has been in an accident. These are referred to as situational (or external) attributions. That is, the situation dictated the behavior that was harmful to us. Of course, our historical experience with the other person influences this assessment. If she is always late, we may assume this is dispositional,



but if she is rarely or never late, we are more likely to blame it on circumstances.

Attribution theorists describe three kinds of bias: fundamental, actor-observer, and intergroup (Allred, 2000). Fundamental bias refers to the likelihood that our first assumption of why someone has behaved in a way we experience as harmful is that the behavior is attributable to that person's nature or disposition. The more significant the injury or harm that we experience, the more fiercely we hold on to dispositional attributions, even in the face of compelling evidence. Actor-observer bias suggests that we tend to ascribe our own harmful behavior to circumstances, but that of others to disposition. If it turns out, for example, that our friend is sitting in another restaurant, acting on information from a recent e-mail, rather than face our own failure in this communication we are likely to blame this on the rash of last-minute messages, the pressures on us, and so on. In other words, we are likely to excuse our own behavior because of the circumstances. Intergroup bias means that we are more likely to give the benefit of the doubt to those within our own group (club, family, friendship circle, race, political affiliation, and so on) than to outsiders.

Understanding the attributions that people make to explain conflict is critical to unpacking their conflict narrative. We often default to a dispositional attribution in conflict because it is easier and perhaps emotionally more gratifying than taking personal responsibility or looking for systemic or structural explanations. The more severe the conflict, the more likely we are to fall back on one of three dispositional explanations, each of which avoids a genuine effort to understand the conflict. These explanatory "crutches" are to attribute conflict to evil, stupidity, or craziness.

We often resort to these when the events are too horrible (for example, the Holocaust), our anger too intense, or the structural causes too complex or obscure (for example, the financial meltdown of 2008) to understand or to face. So we explain events by describing the perpetrator as evil (Saddam Hussein), crazy (Muammar Gaddafi), stupid (pick your least favorite politician), or all three (Adolf Hitler or Idi Amin). Certainly people's approach to conflict is affected by their moral values, their wisdom, and their cognitive functioning, but these attributions are crutches because they don't really explain why particular conflicts have arisen or

developed in the way they have—or what is really going on for the individuals involved and how they might make sense of their own actions, however irrational or repugnant they appear to us. These explanatory crutches allow us to bypass the hard work of understanding the structural or systemic roots of conflict. Moreover, they interfere with our ability to understand a conflict from the perspective of those engaged in it.

Understanding just how people are making sense of a conflict and the stories, histories, or narratives they create to give voice to this is a very important part of understanding the conflict—and of intervening in it (Goldberg, 2009; Winslade and Monk, 2000). The following are some of the specific variables to consider when looking at how people explain a conflict.

- Are the explanations personal (dispositional) or systemic (situational)?
- How rigid and narrow are the explanations (as opposed to multifaceted and open to change)?
- Can disputants understand what is motivating the people they are in conflict with from those people's perspective, or can disputants only see it from their own point of view?
- Are they aware of others' narratives—or of their own, for that matter?
- Have disputants incorporated other points of view into their own explanation?
- What are the dimensions of disputants' narratives (how far back do they go, how deeply do they delve, how broad a set of issues and players do they incorporate)?
- Have the explanations changed? Frequently? Never?
- Do the explanations focus on behavior, feelings, or attitudes?
- Are the narratives hopeless (tragic)—suggesting that nothing can improve—or hopeful (comedic)?
- What are the metaphors used to explain the conflict, and what are their implications?
- Are the explanations specific to the conflict, or do disputants tend to explain all conflicts in the same way?
- What are the cultural contexts of the narratives?
- How widely held—versus how idiosyncratic—are disputants' views of the conflict?



Paying attention to how disputants explain a conflict—and how we ourselves explain it, whether we are parties or interveners—can open important windows into why a conflict develops in the way it does and into the assumptions and values of each of the parties, including our own.

## AVOIDING AND ENGAGING IN CONFLICT

We all choose sometimes to avoid and at other times to engage in conflict. Rather than thinking of avoidance or engagement as conflict styles per se, I think the more useful and interesting question is to consider how and when we choose avoidance or engagement. These are two very different processes. The emotional and behavioral jump from avoiding conflict to engaging in it is often enormous. As a result, we sometimes observe what appear to be significant discontinuities in behavior, attitude, and interactional style when a conflict becomes manifest. We have all seen people who appear calm, easygoing, or accommodating until suddenly some switch seems to be thrown that unleashes a much more confrontational, emotional, or rigid approach. It may be that some personal value or deep emotion has been touched, but for many this change is largely a result of the different styles they exhibit when they are avoiding a conflict and when they are engaging in one. Of course, for some the jump from avoidance to engagement is not so dramatic, and they are less likely to change their behavior or approach as they engage a conflict. But for most of us there is some emotional and behavioral shift that occurs when crossing the subtle barrier that separates avoidance and engagement.

Both avoidance and engagement are key parts of the conflict process, but they involve very different stances toward it. When we are avoiding conflict, our efforts are focused on preventing a conflict from surfacing, denying a conflict's existence, or staying out of an ongoing conflict. In general we are limiting our investment of emotion and energy in a conflict. When engaging, our energy is directed toward participating in a conflict, asserting our needs, expressing our feelings, putting forward our ideas, and promoting particular outcomes. We sometimes go back and forth between avoidance and engagement many times during the course of a conflict, particularly when long-term relationships are involved.

Often the switch between avoidance and engagement produces a change in energy level. Some people resist engaging in a conflict with all the tools at their disposal, but once engaged they do not want to give it up. They are like the person who resists joining a dance or diving into a swimming pool—but once in, that is where he or she wants to stay. Sometimes when people withdraw from engagement and go back to avoidance they feel a loss of meaning. The energy and vitality that engagement in conflict often generates can be as hard to give up as the relative comfort and security of avoidance.

Some people are much more comfortable engaging in conflict quickly and if necessary repeatedly. Others will go to great lengths to avoid conflict, to disengage as quickly as possible, and to prevent its recurrence. The specifics of the conflict of course have a lot to do with the pulls people experience toward avoidance and engagement. Most of us can think of conflicts that we would prefer to avoid at almost all costs, and others that we are very willing to engage in, that seem almost fun.

Kenneth Thomas (1983; also see Thomas and Kilmann, 1974), a management researcher and teacher, has suggested five general strategies people use to approach conflict. These strategies reflect a varying relationship between satisfying one's own interests and addressing the interests of others. *Collaboration* involves an effort to solve both sets of interests; *accommodation* focuses more on satisfying others' interests; *competition* emphasizes one's own interests; *avoidance* involves a low commitment to addressing either set of interests; and *compromise* is directed toward sharing losses and gains jointly. Thomas and Ralph Kilmann (an organizational development specialist) have created the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument, which is based on these concepts, to assess how people approach conflict. This instrument and the model upon which it is founded have been very useful to conflict resolution practitioners because they provide a simple way of analyzing the different approaches that people take to conflict. They also offer a way for all of us to assess our own natural tendencies in conflict.

But the Thomas-Kilmann model has some distinct shortcomings. It does not take fully into account just how variable approaches to conflict can be under different circumstances. In many conflicts people move among all of these strategies, and, as



I have discussed, I believe avoidance strategies and engagement strategies are fundamentally different in nature. There is also an implication that collaboration is the best style and that others are distinctly inferior. If you take the Thomas-Kilmann inventory and determine that your essential style is that of an avoider, compromiser, or accommodator, for example, it can feel as if you have somehow failed the test. But there is no one style that is always preferable, and the cultural meaning of these approaches varies tremendously. We are probably most effective in conflict if we can develop the capacity to use a variety of different approaches depending on the circumstances we find ourselves in and the approaches of other disputants.

## HOW PEOPLE AVOID CONFLICT

Eight distinct methods of avoidance seem prevalent in conflict. These are as follows:

### *Aggressive Avoidance ("Don't Start with Me or You'll Regret It")*

Aggressive behavior is sometimes an effort to avoid conflict. Even though it often seems to escalate conflict (and, as with all avoidance strategies, aggressive avoidance often exacerbates conflict), for many people aggressive behavior is best understood as an effort to intimidate others and thus keep them from engaging in a conflict. Escalation can be fight as a means to flight.

### *Passive Avoidance ("I Refuse to Tango")*

Staying removed from and nonreactive to a situation is the approach we most often associate with avoidance. There are many passive ways of avoiding a conflict, such as withdrawing from a relationship, avoiding contact, remaining silent at crucial times, creating distractions, changing the subject, or disappearing from the scene. Passive approaches are efforts to avoid conflict through inaction of some kind.

### *Passive Aggressive Avoidance ("If You Are Angry at Me, That's Your Problem")*

We have all encountered people who are masters at provoking others without owning up to their own actions in any way. By

getting others to react as they remain above the fray, they often try to have it both ways, both to have a conflict and to avoid it. Sometimes they will use hit-and-run tactics: for example, they will make an emotionally charged statement without allowing for a direct response, thereby relieving some of their own tension but preventing genuine conflict engagement. Sometimes people indicate their anger or disapproval of something nonverbally (an expressive roll of the eyes, for example) while verbally denying any dispute or disagreement.

### *Avoidance Through Hopelessness ("What's the Use?")*

One of the easiest ways to avoid a conflict is to view the situation as beyond repair or to deny that one has any power to affect a problem. If there is no hope, then what is the point of engaging in conflict?

### *Avoidance Through Surrogates ("Let's You and Them Fight")*

Some people are masters at setting up or at least allowing others to fight their battles while they remain on the sidelines. Sometimes people avoid a conflict about a sensitive issue by engaging over a less sensitive one. Likewise, sometimes people will engage in a conflict with a person who functions as a surrogate for a more intimidating adversary.

### *Avoidance Through Denial ("If I Close My Eyes, It Will Go Away")*

The simplest (and most primitive) approach is frequently the most prevalent. Often people deny that a conflict exists, hoping that in some way the denial will become the reality. Sometimes the existence of a conflict is acknowledged, but its scope or magnitude is minimized.

### *Avoidance Through Premature Problem Solving ("There's No Conflict, I Have Fixed Everything")*

Trying to solve a problem before the timing is right, the conflict is understood, feelings have been expressed, values have been articulated, and people have been heard and acknowledged can be a very powerful way of avoiding conflict. Sometimes all someone wants is a solution, but to the extent that the conflict possesses a significant expressive element or more deeply entrenched issues,



problem solving can be equivalent to conflict avoidance. Many conflicts are long term or enduring (Mayer, 2009b). By focusing on short-term solutions to long-term conflicts, people often avoid the most significant and difficult elements of those conflicts.

*Avoidance by Folding ("OK, We'll Do It Your Way; Now Can We Talk About Something Else?")*

People sometimes avoid engaging by caving in—by accepting more responsibility than they really feel or by conceding on all the issues. Sometimes disputants will sacrifice very important needs to avoid engaging in a conflict or even seeing whether a conflict really exists. People may also make premature or insincere apologies at least in part to avoid engaging in a conflict. An apology under such circumstances can be very close to saying, "What more do you want? I have apologized. Do I really have to listen to you go on and on?"

These eight approaches to avoiding conflict are used in a variety of combinations. Someone may first try a passive aggressive approach, and then, when this does not work, have a go at an aggressive outburst to forestall further engagement. In the end he or she may resort to folding or premature problem solving as the avoidance approach of last resort. It is not unusual to see both parties in a conflict participate in a sort of collusion of avoidance, as in the case of the two accountants.

Doug and Alex seemed happily mired in their conflict. Both were accountants, with adjoining offices in a midsize corporation. They could not stand each other, and they made this very clear to their supervisors, colleagues, friends, and anyone else who would listen. They once had a screaming match, heard by their whole department. But they never raised their genuine issues directly with each other. They exchanged curt e-mails and communicated their feelings in many nonverbal ways, and their talk with each other was often dripping with sarcasm and innuendo, but they always danced around their actual differences. Their supervisor asked me to look into the possibility of mediation. Both were more than happy to share their tales of woe with me separately, but they adamantly refused to sit in the same room with each other. They said it was hopeless, that talk was cheap, and that they would be better off

just ignoring each other. It was amazing how similarly they viewed the situation in that regard. Their discussions with me did help to defuse the situation temporarily, and they did agree to try to minimize involving others in their conflict. But they were allies in avoidance. Eventually they were both transferred to different departments.

These two individuals employed many different avoidance strategies, including hopelessness, the use of surrogates, aggressive avoidance, and at times folding. But both of them were especially adept at the passive aggressive approach—making their feelings clear through innuendo and gestures but refusing to take on the conflict directly. Given the eventual outcome, avoidance may have been their best strategy. For me, it was an example of how constructive engagement efforts cannot proceed when people are deeply committed to avoidance.

There are times when avoidance is appropriate and necessary. Sometimes timing or priorities make this desirable. Avoidance may also be the best alternative when someone does not have the power or the emotional resources to get his or her needs met through a conflict. And sometimes conflict should be avoided because it is physically or emotionally dangerous. At other times, however, avoidance is a significant problem that can result in later escalation or the sacrifice of important needs and relationships.

If we want to comprehend the many different ways in which people approach conflict, we need to have a nuanced understanding of the many faces of avoidance. We can look at avoidance as a style, a decision, a tactic, or a personality trait, but however we categorize it we should not underestimate its prevalence in people's approach to conflict. Avoidance, although sometimes necessary and even constructive, is more often a major obstacle to dealing with conflicts in a constructive manner.

## HOW PEOPLE ENGAGE IN CONFLICT

There are those who never give up trying to avoid conflict. But most people, when faced with ongoing conflict, will eventually engage. When disputants engage in conflict, they do so with an attitude or approach to meeting their needs that is based on both their general assumptions about conflict and the particular circumstances



they are facing. We can observe five basic ways in which people try to meet their needs when engaged in conflict. As Ury, Brett, and Goldberg (1988) have suggested, they may work through the exercise of power, an assertion of rights, or an interest-based negotiation process. But there are at least two other significant approaches that do not easily fall within this tri-part framework. One is normative, essentially involving an appeal to fairness, morality, ethics, or values. The other approach involves the use of manipulation or indirection (not directly dealing with the issue or conflict but addressing it through surrogate issues or actions).

#### *Power-Based Approaches*

Power-based approaches to conflict are often destructive, are sometimes violent, and seldom lead directly to improved relations. However, they are not always harmful. Strikes, public protests, letter-writing campaigns, boycotts, and efforts to obtain political power may all be thought of as the legitimate exercise of power that can produce positive results.

Sometimes individuals or groups must develop their potential to exercise power and demonstrate their willingness to use it before less confrontational approaches can be effective. Most social movements in our country have begun by promoting their cause through the (sometimes violent) exercise of power. The labor movement organized a series of worker actions. The civil rights movement employed nonviolent direct action campaigns, as did the women's suffrage and environmental movements. Sometimes these led to direct reforms, but often their main result was to create a framework for a different approach to conflict. Until environmentalists demonstrated that they could effectively assert their power through direct action, political campaigns, boycotts, and legal actions, they were not significant players in policy formation. Once they began to show that they were a force to be reckoned with, laws were passed and policies were established that created a framework for a rights-based approach, and environmentalists were increasingly invited into policy development and problem-solving processes. Today it is hard to imagine a major environmental conflict being resolved without some involvement of environmental activists.

#### *Rights-Based Approaches*

Because power-based approaches are often disruptive, costly, and hard on relationships, social structures usually try to implement alternative mechanisms for dealing with conflict. This is particularly the case once it becomes clear that power is sufficiently distributed among the contending parties to make power-based approaches costly and the outcome doubtful. The usual response when this happens is the creation of a rights-based framework, through which disputants can attempt to get their needs met by asserting their privilege or claim under some established structure of law, policy, regulation, or procedure. Rights-based approaches require some codification of entitlements and responsibilities, as well as mechanisms for deciding how these should be brought to bear in any particular situation. The court system is, of course, a primary example of this, but so are disciplinary procedures in schools, organizational policies and procedures, and grievance systems. In fact, almost any formal system is characterized by at least some rights-based decision-making structures. Families informally establish such structures as well. For example, any time we tell our children that they can watch TV for one hour per day and that they must alternate who gets to choose the program, we have created a rights-based framework.

Rights-based structures are a necessary counterforce to power-based approaches. When it was clear that the environmental movement was a force to contend with (and that environmental issues could not be ignored), a number of federal, state, and local laws and implementing regulations were passed (such as the National Environmental Policy Act, the Clean Water and Clean Air Acts, and the Endangered Species Act). Supplemented with implementing regulations and court decisions, this legislation became the foundation for a rights-based framework for conducting environmental conflicts. As a result many environmental conflicts now take place through debates and struggles over legal rights, requirements, and prerogatives. Similar developments have occurred in the areas of labor relations, family policy, civil rights, and special education.

Rights-based conflicts are fundamentally different from power-based conflicts. In a power-based struggle, the essential message is, "Do what I want because I have the power to reward you or



punish you." In a rights-based struggle, the message is, "The law (or organizational bylaws, or our contract) requires you to do what I want." The structure of rights-based conflicts tends to focus us less on what we need and more on what we have the right to get. This is both a strength and weakness. On the one hand, it discourages destructive power struggles and sets parameters around both the process and the potential outcome of the conflict. On the other hand, it tends to distract people from considering what their needs really are or what the wisest approach to the conflict might be, and it can emphasize form over substance, justification over motivation. Rights-based approaches can be costly, time consuming, and unpredictable as well. Much of the current cynicism about lawyers and courts arises from a sense that an alienating and somewhat out-of-control rights-based approach has taken over and complicated too many areas of conflict intervention and decision making in our society. At the same time, however, a major strength of any democracy is the existence of a popularly accepted rights-based approach to resolving conflicts. When people refer to the rule of law, this is essentially what they mean.

Although power- and rights-based approaches are very different, they are not mutually exclusive. For example, there are many rights-based frameworks for conducting power struggles. There are laws that govern strikes, boycotts, and the exercise of parental authority. Developing one's ability to engage in rights-based efforts, or threatening to do so, can in fact be a power play. ("I'll sue if you don't do what I want.")

#### *Interest-Based Approaches*

Interest-based problem solving involves asserting one's needs or concerns and working toward a resolution that adequately addresses them. This also entails trying to understand and address the interests of others. (I discuss this approach in more depth in Chapter Eight when I consider the negotiation process.) Interest-based approaches, though often collaborative, are certainly not always so. For example, I have seen many divorcing couples engaged in furious fights over who should have the children at a particular time, and these fights have focused on what was in the children's best interests. Instead of resorting to overt power tactics or arguing about the divorce agreement, the disputants have focused on why

it is important that the children be with them at that time and how they think their proposal would best meet the children's needs. Nonetheless, some of these interchanges have been destructive, angry, and hurtful.

Furthermore, not all interests are constructive or reasonable. The desire for revenge, to hurt someone, to exclude someone from a certain racial or ethnic background from a leadership role, to make a great deal of money at someone else's expense, or to be able to exploit natural resources for a profit are all interests that could be motivating someone in a conflict. Just because someone is focusing on interests does not mean that he or she is being ethical, fair, or collaborative. However, to the extent that disputants are focusing on their genuine interests or needs, they are addressing the most essential elements of a conflict, and these form the basis on which progress is most likely to be made.

The essence of the interest-based approach is not that the disputants are necessarily collaborative or nice but that they try to deal with the conflict by discussing the various needs they have as opposed to trying to impose a solution through the application of power or the assertion of rights. The goal of many collaborative problem-solving efforts is to transform a power- or rights-based approach into an interest-based one. This was, for example, the purpose of the Child Protection Mediation Project.

When a day care provider reported a number of bruises on the back of a five-year-old, the local child protection agency was called. Its representatives placed the child in protective custody, notified the parent, Mrs. J., and told her to come to the agency's offices the next morning. After gathering background information, the caseworker explained the child protection laws to the parent and discussed with her what options she had.

The caseworker said that if the mother agreed to attend parenting classes and regular meetings with a counselor, the child could be returned home. Mrs. J. said she would do whatever she had to, but then she missed her first two appointments. The caseworker referred the case to the Child Protection Mediation Project (Gollen and Mayer, 1987; Mayer, 1985, 2009a), a CDR Associates project that I codirected.

In the ensuing mediation Mrs. J.'s concerns about attending classes and counseling while trying to hold down a job and take



care of two children were discussed. She also shared her belief that everyone in the classes and counseling sessions would treat her as if she were a "bad person." The caseworker discussed her need for assurances from Mrs. J. that she was learning better ways to discipline her children and that the child was not in danger.

Mrs. J. agreed that she could use support in figuring out how to deal with her sometimes aggressive young child. The two worked out an agreed-upon schedule for attending a parent support group, and the mother also agreed to meet with the caseworker once a week, after her shift as a supermarket cashier ended.

By engaging in a mediated discussion that focused on the concerns and needs of the parent, the caseworker, and the child, the parties reached an agreement based on their interests rather than on what Mrs. J. thought she had to do. Although this solution was fairly similar to the one originally negotiated, it proved more durable.

#### *Normative Approaches (Appeals to Fairness)*

We often try to get our way in a conflict by asserting a moral right to a certain outcome or course of action. In doing this we are trying to meet our needs through an appeal to what is fair, ethical, moral, or just. We can call this a normative or principled approach. It is similar to the interest-based approach because principles are related to interests. However, instead of focusing on interests (what our needs are), we are focusing on what is the "right" thing to do, and we are invoking an external standard of fairness or justice. In appealing to this external set of standards, a principle-based approach is similar to a rights-based approach, but the nature of the standards are different and there is rarely an adjudicative mechanism. Furthermore, normative standards are not appealable to a formal and legally sanctioned oversight body (at least not in secular societies). They are instead based on a mix of a cultural consensus and individual beliefs.

The essence of a normative approach is the invocation of some specified or implied standard of conduct. If I say that it is only fair that I get to have something, I am implying that there is some standard of fairness that says it is mine. The heart of my approach in this case is not to assert what my needs are or to argue that I have a right to something because of some established rule; instead I am asserting a value, which may or may not be formally codified.

#### *Manipulation-Based Approaches (Indirection)*

A final approach is through indirection or manipulation. There are of course countless ways of doing this. At times this approach may be a form of conflict avoidance, but it can also characterize a conflict engagement strategy. As with all of these approaches, manipulation can be destructive or constructive. If I lie, cheat, mislead, and in general behave in an untrustworthy way, the potential for conflict escalation and long-term destructive consequences is great. But manipulation is not always destructive, especially when compared to the alternatives. Consider, for example, the challenge of dealing with an elderly parent about his increasingly unreliable driving. The parent may be very resistant to openly giving up the "right" to drive. Suppose, however, that alternative arrangements are always made for transportation, the car license is not renewed, and the parent goes along with this, without ever actually agreeing not to drive. Can we really say that this is a destructive approach to handling that particular conflict? Or consider how frequently less powerful people in organizations get their needs met through manipulations of their managers or of the rules of the organization. Exploited and disempowered people often have no alternative for addressing their needs in a conflict except to use indirection or manipulation. Manipulation is a very common way in which people handle conflict, and to some extent it is probably present in most conflicts. The essence of manipulation is to try to get others to meet one's needs without directly confronting the issue or putting one's needs or desires clearly on the table. This may be motivated by a sense of powerlessness or vulnerability.

People blend and mix these different approaches in many ways, but there are fundamental differences among them. At any given time, one of these is likely to be the dominant way in which an individual engages in a particular conflict. We often go through a succession of approaches—when one does not seem to work, we go to another. We commonly start with a more normative or interest-based approach but then move to a rights- or power-based approach when we find our needs are not getting met. We also may change our approach in response to how others are approaching us. Consider, for example, the different ways in



which a parent might try to enforce a bedtime on a child and how the child might try to resist.

#### *Interest Based*

Parent: Go to bed; you need your sleep.  
Child: But I want to watch the end of this program.

#### *Rights Based*

Parent: We agreed that you could watch one late program a week, and you did that Monday.  
Child: You said that if I cleaned up my room I could stay up late.

#### *Principle Based (Normative)*

Parent: I should not have to argue with you about bedtime.  
Child: You're being unfair—all my friends get to watch this show.

#### *Power Based*

Parent: Go to bed or I will take you to bed.  
Child: If I can't watch this program, I'm going to hold my breath.

#### *Manipulation Based*

Parent: Let's have some ice cream while I read you a bedtime story.  
Child: OK, I'll be right there. [Keeps watching the TV]

There are consequences for any approach that is taken, and there is a problem if a social structure does not achieve a good balance among approaches. It is easy for those of us in the business of collaborative conflict engagement to promote an interest-based approach, but at times it is in fact the application of power, rights, fairness, or even manipulation that is needed. Overreliance on power, rights, fairness, or manipulation can escalate conflict and damage relationships. However, when disempowered disputants engage in an interest-based conflict process without having taken steps to develop their power or assert their rights, they are often very vulnerable.

Problems frequently arise when disputing parties use incompatible approaches to conflict. If an employee raises personal job scheduling needs with a manager who responds by citing the provisions of the employment contract, a communication breakdown may easily ensue. Each might well feel unheard and believe the other to be unreasonable. Or if the parent in the earlier example continues to rely on the agreement made, and the child continues to agree to turn off the TV in a minute—but doesn't, an escalation is likely.

## STYLES OF CONFLICT ENGAGEMENT

If we know someone fairly well, we can often predict, without even knowing what the issues are, how that person will handle a conflict with someone else. Most of us have a characteristic approach to dealing with conflict. But we also have the capacity to vary our responses to fit the situation. One of the most important differences among disputants is in the flexibility of their response to conflict. Some have a fairly rigid or limited response, whereas others can vary their style from situation to situation. Flexibility of response is one important predictor of how well people will handle conflict in their lives.

There are several basic variables that I find helpful in defining the styles that people use in conflict. Each variable may be thought of as a continuum, and people tend to occupy different segments of that continuum in different types of conflicts. For example, one conflict style variable is how direct or indirect an approach one takes to communication. Some people are very blunt, outspoken, and clear about their feelings and their desires. Others are more circumspect and abstract. Most of us can probably employ at least a little of both tendencies if the context requires, even though we may prefer being closer to one end or the other of this spectrum. Our styles vary, so understanding how someone approaches conflict is a matter not simply of categorizing him or her in accordance with these variables but of recognizing the range of styles a person is apt to use and the circumstances (and people) that evoke different styles.

The following variables may be divided into three groups: those relating to individuals' cognitive style (their way of understanding



conflict), to their emotional style (how they express and relate to emotionality in conflict), and to their behavior in conflict. These groups are analogous to the three dimensions of conflict (cognitive, emotional, and behavioral) discussed in Chapter One. Each variable can be thought of as defining a continuum between two polar extremes.

### COGNITIVE VARIABLES

Cognitive variables describe differences in how people make sense of conflict, how they present their ideas and needs, and how they approach the problem-solving process.

#### *Analytical Versus Intuitive*

The analytical style is characterized by the use of logical reasoning and data analysis. Individuals attempt to weigh costs, benefits, and choices and to consider issues one at a time. Individuals using the intuitive approach rely more on perceptions, insights, and feelings as guides to how to proceed.

#### *Linear Versus Holistic*

A linear style is characterized by taking issues one at a time and considering facts, options, costs, and benefits sequentially. In the linear style of communication, one person speaks at a time and one subject is considered at a time. People employing a holistic style consider many issues simultaneously and move around easily among a focus on interests, an expression of feelings, a consideration of solutions, and a discussion of issues. In holistic communication, people may speak about several different things at once.

#### *Integrative Versus Distributive*

The integrative style promotes a focus on common interests and opportunities for joint gain. People exhibiting this style have a tendency to think in terms of maximizing everyone's satisfaction. Disputants with a distributive style focus more on how to divide existing benefits among disputants and are usually particularly oriented to determining how to maximize their own gain or minimize their loss.

#### *Outcome Focused Versus Process Focused*

Many people focus primarily on outcomes in conflict. They want to figure out what is going to be done and when. Others are more concerned about the process of the interaction.

### EMOTIONAL VARIABLES

Emotional variables describe people's attitudes and feelings concerning conflict and how they handle these in conflict.

#### *Enthusiastic Versus Reluctant*

People have widely different tolerances for being in conflict. Some are "conflict junkies" who feel most alive and engaged in the middle of a conflict. I can recall many meetings in which someone (sometimes me) has decided to liven things up by starting a conflict. Some individuals seem to feel that any current or potential conflict must be raised at every opportunity, and that if they are not in conflict they are not fully alive. Most of us, however, are at least somewhat reluctant or fearful about being in conflict, and as a result occasionally use several of the avoidance strategies described earlier. Sometimes people will go to great extremes to maintain their distance or minimize their participation in a conflict and to avoid having any direct interaction with anyone with whom they are in conflict.

#### *Risk Taking Versus Risk Averse*

The major goal for some in conflict is to minimize risk or potential harm. For others the primary goal is to maximize the possible benefits that might be accrued. The former's approach to conflict is characterized by caution, the latter's by risk taking.

#### *Emotional Versus Rational*

The emotional and the rational are not necessarily opposite as personality traits. In conflict, however, some people are more likely to be emotionally expressive and to focus on their feelings, whereas others are more likely to concentrate on employing an ostensibly logical process to work through the conflict.



*Volatile Versus Unprovocable*

Some people seem to remain consistently calm, even, and not easily provoked in conflict, whereas others seem always on the edge of a temper tantrum or emotional meltdown. Individuals often become less volatile as they mature or develop their interpersonal skills.

## BEHAVIORAL VARIABLES

An enormous number of variables could be identified to describe our different behavioral tendencies in conflict, ranging from our overall demeanor to our particular responses to specific situations. The following seem to be particularly pertinent to the different individual approaches we see in conflict:

*Direct Versus Indirect*

Some people assert their needs, issues, or feelings directly and openly, and others express them indirectly through surrogate issues, metaphors, or third parties. There are people who feel that openly sharing their concerns or feelings is a personal violation and profoundly embarrassing. Others look to conflict as an opportunity to unburden themselves and value directness and transparency in their communication.

*Relational Versus Substantive*

A relational style focuses on building, repairing, or maintaining a relationship, whereas a substantive style is oriented toward addressing the issues in dispute. Sometimes these differences of style are manifested in the amount of time that each person wishes to devote to visiting, getting to know one another, or informally interacting before turning to a discussion of difficult issues (see Moore and Woodrow, 2010).

*Submissive Versus Dominant*

Submissive and dominant behaviors have less to do with whether people get their needs met than with the roles these individuals play in a conflict. At one end of this continuum are those who are always content to let others take the lead in a conflict interaction, even when they are in extreme disagreement with them. At the

other end are those who must be the driving force of the process. Sometimes the submissive style is actually the most powerful in controlling the course and outcome of a conflict—meekness and humility can be a morally effective strategy and can induce others to work very hard to obtain the submissive disputants' agreement.

*Threatening Versus Conciliatory*

Some people try to get their way by intimidating others, threatening consequences, and using whatever sources of coercive power they have. Others try to placate, repair relationships, and avoid the direct application of coercive power at all costs.

For a behavior, emotional stance, or cognitive method to be an individual's conflict style, it has to be a characteristic approach, preference, or marked tendency for that person and not simply a product of the particular circumstances. That does not mean that circumstances do not elicit certain styles or approaches, however. We may observe individuals who seem to vary their styles to fit the circumstances to the point where we wonder whether they have any continuity of style at all. Often they have more consistency than we may initially observe, but it is a consistency that can be understood only in context. For example, I have worked with people who appear to be calm, submissive, and even meek when there is no pressure to make an immediate decision. But when circumstances require a decision, they become emotional, dominating, and demanding. They do have a consistency of style, but understanding it requires attention to different contexts.

The stylistic variables I have outlined here are not independent of one another. They are also not by any means an exhaustive inventory of styles, but they are significant descriptors of the different tendencies people exhibit in handling conflict.

In considering conflict styles, conflict interveners confront two further important questions. First, do groups, organizations, communities, and societies have conflict styles? For example, does the United States have a conflict style? Does the United Auto Workers? Google? New York City? A particular class in a school? Your family? As parties to conflict these entities do exhibit styles of conflicting, but this does not mean that all the individuals who make up each



entity themselves share these approaches. Although the descriptions of the variables given here might have to be slightly altered to apply to groups or organizations, the variables themselves are very relevant. As a general rule, the larger a group, the harder it is to identify a style without stereotyping or making unsupportable generalizations. But that does not mean we cannot find some predominant characteristics or themes in how any particular group, organization, community, or system handles conflict. Just consider the differences you might expect to encounter in how conflict is dealt with in New York City versus in Omaha, Nebraska. In New York, direct confrontation about differences is more normative, and "politeness" is a less encompassing interactional value than it is in Omaha.

The second question is more complicated. Are there good and bad conflict styles? An extreme or rigid approach in any style may be harmful to the individuals or groups exhibiting it and to those with whom they interact. But I believe it is less productive to think about whether conflict styles are good or bad than to consider whether they are effective or nonproductive in any given circumstance. Extremes of style aside, most of these approaches have been effective at different times. The most important question here is how adaptable and flexible people can be in the style they bring to any given conflict. When people can alter their style to adapt to a particular situation, they are likely to be more effective than when their approach is extremely limited.

## ROLES PEOPLE PLAY IN CONFLICT

Another way of understanding how people approach conflict is to consider the roles that they are most inclined to take on when in conflict. The roles that we as individuals are ordinarily most comfortable with are no doubt related to the professional or formal roles we may choose to assume as conflict interveners, but these formal roles are not identical to the roles that conflict may demand of us, which we usually assume informally and often unconsciously. Although people play many *de facto* roles in conflict, the following six seem the most prevalent.

- *Advocate (negotiator)*: Arguing or pushing for a particular outcome or set of interests

- *Decision maker (arbitrator)*: Deciding among competing positions or claims
- *Facilitator (mediator)*: Helping others communicate and negotiate
- *Conciliator (empathizer)*: Tuning into and addressing the emotional elements of a conflict
- *Information provider (expert)*: Providing information or opinions to decision makers or negotiators.
- *Observer (witness, audience)*: Watching, reporting, and reacting to others in conflict

There are certainly other roles people can play in conflict (for example, coach, record keeper, cheerleader, publicizer, convenor, gatekeeper). But these six are the key roles in the structure of most conflicts. Each can be played in many different ways, and each can contribute to conflict escalation or de-escalation. Elements of several different roles are often present in how people participate in any given conflict, and no matter what a person's role is, he or she always has personal needs in play (for example, to do a good job, to be seen to be competent or in control, to be empathetic and supportive).

Often disputants enter a conflict primarily in one role but then change roles, sometimes repeatedly and rapidly. Conflict can easily escalate when people present themselves as playing one role (for example, facilitator or information provider) but actually take on a different role (arbitrator or advocate). Maintaining clarity about the role we are playing and how it might be altered as circumstances change is a significant challenge we all face when we enter into conflicts as disputants or interveners.

## PATTERNS OF ENGAGEMENT: THE CONFLICT DANCE

Focusing on the approaches and motivations of the individuals involved in a conflict is an important start to understanding the nature of a conflict, but we are only focusing on one part of the picture if we don't also consider the interactional patterns among disputants. Disputants cocreate a system of interaction. We can call



this process the "conflict dance." Much like two people doing a tango, people embroiled in a dispute play off each other's conflict approaches, shifting back and forth between complementary and opposing tactics. For example, whether I take an interest-based approach to conflict depends on whether the person I am in conflict with cooperates, in a sense, with my use of my preferred approach. If my efforts to discuss our concerns are continually responded to with threats to take me to court or to impose consequences on me, I may be forced (or at least strongly induced) to adopt a different style in response. And even if someone I am in conflict with wants to adopt a more collaborative approach, if by doing so that person feels pushed or manipulated into a position he or she is not comfortable with, that individual may end up resorting to power-based responses, thereby eliciting those responses from me. As we continue to modify and change our approaches, this conflict dance continues.

In this and many other ways, the approach we take to conflict, the role we end up playing, and our style of engagement or avoidance are determined not solely by our individual conflict preferences or tendencies but also by the interactional system among all conflict participants. We can see this in almost any conflict interaction, and sometimes we experience this very dramatically. Some people "push our buttons" or "bring out our worst selves" as opposed to encouraging our "better angels." And of course we do the same for others. Sometimes understanding how this conflict dance operates can provide an important clue as to how to move a conflict in a better direction:

Gillian was an assistant to the CEO of Foodspace USA, a grocery chain. Serena was the leader of a community group protesting what they considered to be Foodspace USA's price-gouging policies in poor neighborhoods. After several weeks of increasingly angry protests, Foodspace USA agreed to enter into mediation with me and a colleague. Gillian was the major negotiator for Foodspace USA, and Serena led the community group's team.

Both sides had many reasons to come to an agreement. The protest was beginning to run out of steam, and Foodspace USA was trying to open a new store in a neighborhood nearby and was facing resistance from the city planners due to the unrest they were currently facing. Furthermore, both Gillian and Serena seemed

committed to and fairly skilled at collaborative approaches to negotiation. But their approaches to conflict did not mesh very well. Gillian was relationally oriented and holistic. Serena was very issue focused and linear. And of course both were suspicious of each other. Meetings would begin with Gillian, quite sincerely, wanting to find out a bit more about Serena, her family, her interests, and her life in the community. Serena would experience this as intrusive, manipulative, and evasive. She wanted to move quickly to a discussion about pricing, quality, and service. Gillian would discuss these as well, but in a context of trying to talk about the overall experience of customers, managers, and workers.

Every time Serena tried to push a specific discussion about prices, Gillian felt that she was being attacked and would respond with a fairly personal discussion of how difficult it had been trying to make this business work. In the course of this, she would often try to connect with Serena as a working mother. This in turn felt like more evasiveness to Serena, who in response would get more specific about prices. It felt like they were in a repetitive pattern of interaction that they did not know how to end. Interestingly, taken alone, Gillian was not an extreme example of a relationally focused person, nor was Serena completely committed to a substantive style. But their interaction was exacerbating the differences in their respective styles rather than bringing them together.

My colleague and I were able to assist by pointing out this pattern and by being "stylistic interpreters" for both Gillian and Serena. We would engage Gillian in a personal discussion and redirect her to substantive concerns; we would engage Serena in a substantive discussion but check in with her about how she thought she and her group were doing and how they were feeling about the development of a bargaining relationship with Gillian.

Obviously this conflict dance can play out in many different ways, even with just two disputants. With a group, the possibilities proliferate as the conflict system becomes more complex. A few of the patterns we might look for include the following:

- *Opposites attract.* Styles that are very different can sometimes work well together. Submissive can work with dominant, linear with holistic, analytical with intuitive. These approaches can sometimes effectively balance each other out, each disputant allowing the other to stay in his or her comfort zone and still



move the process forward. Similarly, if one person prefers a facilitator role and another the advocate role, each can enable the other.

- *Opposites rebel.* As in the Foodspace USA mediation just described, sometimes one style provokes the opposite style in another, and this encourages the first party to move further toward the extreme of his or her natural style. This can increase the heat and make constructive interaction more difficult.
- *Similarities attract.* We are sometimes much more comfortable working with people with a similar engagement style. If we are most comfortable taking a rights-based approach to conflict, for example, we may gravitate toward others more apt to use that style (for example, when two lawyers converse informally about a case). Also, by responding with rights-based arguments, we may elicit that style from others as well. This is an important element in how conflict is handled in the legal community.
- *Similarities rebel.* Sometimes it is very hard for both parties in a conflict to adopt the same style because certain approaches require the energy or input of other approaches to be effective. For example, if both want to be the facilitator, if both want to take up the emotional space in a group, or if both take a very assertive approach to promoting their point of view, the conflict can stagnate or escalate.
- *Styles converge.* Sometimes disputants with very different styles prompt each other to move toward a common or at least overlapping style, more toward the middle of the spectrum of approaches. For example, I start out very rational, you emotional, but gradually you focus on a more linear, substance-oriented approach and I become more expressive and holistic. I have witnessed parties who completely switch approaches over the course of a conflict.
- *Multiple styles coexist.* Sometimes we find that multiple styles can evolve, and groups in particular find ways to accommodate quite a few different approaches. People may move rapidly among different styles in response to others who are moving rapidly among different styles. This can seem volatile and confusing, but sometimes it works remarkably well, for example

when participants in an interaction seem to rotate through the roles of facilitator, analyzer, emoter, and decision maker. We can sometimes observe this phenomenon among peer groups of young children whose members seem to know instinctively when it is all right to take up emotional space and when, instead, they need to leave that space for others to occupy or even provide the nurturing to enable others to go there.

- *Conflictants adopt a new style.* Disputants sometimes find a third way—one that is completely different from either of their natural tendencies but allows them to interact. In this circumstance, each participant moves into a relatively new approach—one that can move the conflict forward in a productive or nonproductive way. Two people in a conflict might both naturally be fairly nonlinear in their approach, but to move a process forward they might both adopt, with varying degrees of comfort, a more linear approach (for example, when trying to come up with an agenda of issues to discuss). Or because they are both caught up in an emotionally intense conflict, two people who are naturally more integrative in their approach might become much more aggressive and positional.

Over the course of a conflict we might observe parties adopting and maintaining a relatively stable approach, or we might see that the approach they take with each other changes quickly and often. Sometimes a stable approach to conflict is perfectly functional, but sometimes people get locked into nonproductive patterns of interaction. Sometimes changing approaches are a sign of individuals' adapting to each other, but rapid changes in approach may also be a source or symptom of conflict escalation or communication breakdown.

When we are trying to change the nature of a conflict process, it is important to pay attention to both the pattern of interaction and the individual approach of each participant. When it comes to conflict, we never dance alone.

As with so many other efforts to understand human behavior, in conflict we face the structural versus individual dilemma: To what extent is behavior in conflict primarily a result of the structure within which the conflict takes place, and to what extent does



it reflect what individuals bring to that structure? Does the situation call forth the behavior, or do individuals' values, styles, and role preferences determine their approach? It is obvious that both the nature of the conflict and the nature of the disputants are important. We err if we think we can understand a conflict without examining the values, styles, and preferences of the individuals involved. But we also make a mistake if we fail to pay adequate attention to the structural elements of the conflict. Understanding any conflict requires simultaneously paying attention to both the individuals in the conflict and the system or structure from which the conflict arose. In the next chapter I discuss one defining feature of the structure of conflict—the nature and role of power.

### CHAPTER THREE

## POWER AND CONFLICT

Power is the currency of conflict. Whether its exercise is intentional or not, when we are engaged in conflict our power is in play. The choice in conflict is not whether to use power but how to use it and how to respond to the inevitable use of power by others. Power can be used intentionally or unconsciously, collaboratively or coercively, obviously or implicitly, constructively or destructively. When we try to meet our needs in the face of resistance or opposition, we are exercising power. When we try to persuade others to change their behavior or approach to a conflict, we are exercising power. In fact, almost every move we make to further our goals in a conflict situation involves the exercise of some kind of power, no matter what our role is. Whether we will succeed in accomplishing our aims depends in part on how much power we are able to muster and how wise we are in using it. The exercise of power is not necessarily coercive, antagonistic, escalatory, or combative, although it certainly can be any of these. All of us exercise power continually, and we often do so in a way that promotes rapport or reconciliation. If we do not understand the nature of power and how power affects conflict, we cannot understand conflict itself.

*Note:* Parts of this chapter are adapted from B. Mayer, "The Dynamics of Power in Mediation and Conflict Resolution," *Mediation Quarterly*, Summer 1987 (16), pp. 75–86.