Theory to Practice

The Root Causes and Cures of Conflict

Learning Objectives

- Demonstrate an understanding of the root causes of unproductive conflict.
- Diagnose the causes of unproductive conflict within an organization.
- Explain the differences among key conflict theories such as attribution theory, procedural justice theory, conflict ripeness, and others.
- Describe the differences between structural and nonstructural sources of conflict.

ELISE AND UNPRODUCTIVE CONFLICT AT MAIN STREET BAKERIES

This morning Elise got a call from Ben, her director for human resources (HR). Ben told her he has been asked to find yet another assistant manager for store number seventy-five because the one they had just resigned. This makes four assistant managers in less than two years. The turnover level for the other employees at store number seventy-five is 65 percent higher than for the rest of the company. In general, Main Street Bakeries holds onto its employees for many years so it is surprising to see this level of turnover. Ben wanted to bring this issue to Elise's attention and he recommends that either he or Elise should visit this store (more than one thousand miles away from the corporate office) in order to find out what is happening there. Elise agrees and decides that Ben should do the initial digging and make recommendations back to her about possible next steps.

There are many ways to think about the origins of conflict and theories of conflict resolution with research coming from diverse areas of the behavioral sciences, social sciences, and physical sciences. A brief examination of some of these key theories is indispensable to a manager's ability to predict, diagnose, and intervene successfully in conflicts. This chapter begins with explanations of conflict's origins, which come from the physical sciences, and then progresses to social science explanations of intrapersonal, interpersonal, and intergroup conflict. These theories are linked to managerial conflict resolution through examples and illustrations throughout the chapter. Once managers understand the root causes of conflict, they are better able to find creative and constructive approaches to managing conflict at work.

BIOLOGICAL, PHYSIOLOGICAL, AND EVOLUTIONARY THEORIES OF CONFLICT AND RESOLUTION

Since about 2000, research has yielded great insights into the biological, physiological, and evolutionary sources of human behavior. Scientists are learning more every day about what makes us tick, including common sources of and responses to conflict and cooperation.

The Evolution of Cooperation and Conflict

Good managers understand how to motivate their employees to perform at a high level and to cooperate with each other successfully. By understanding the mechanisms through which cooperative behavior in humans has evolved, managers are better able to harness motivating forces in the service of conflict prevention and early resolution.

In order for human beings to live and work successfully in groups, we have had to develop the ability to differentiate those who will likely cooperate for mutual gain from individuals who will seek individual gain at the group's expense. Game theorists label this latter group as *defectors*. Game theory uses a combination of mathematics and economics to predict human behavior in circumstances with varying incentive structures (see von Neumann, 1944). For example, how can managers discourage shirking in group environments? One lazy worker can drive a small office crazy as the sense of unfairness rises among those who have to pick up the slack. Game theorists have much to tell us on this issue.

Game theorists as well as evolutionary biologists have long sought to uncover the mysteries that explain why we do what we do. For example,

> being nice made evolutionary sense when we lived in small bands surrounded
> by relatives because helping them helped our genes survive. And we had a direct
> incentive to be fair to people who would later reciprocate kindness or punish
> selfishness. But why even consider returning a stranger's wallet you find in a
> taxicab? Why leave a tip in a restaurant you'll never visit again? (Tierney, 2010)

Yet people do. Most people are honest and try hard to be good public and corporate citizens even when there is little overt incentive to do so. However, how do we explain and deal with the occasional individual who claims the work of others as his own or fails to deliver on deadlines and promises, leaving others to hold the bag?

Game theorists have learned that cooperative individuals are better off if they can find other cooperative people with whom they can trade, unite for mutual defense, reproduce, and otherwise work with for mutual gain (Vogel, 2004, February 20). The work of biologist William Hamilton (1964) shows us that humans and other animals cooperate with family members, even at their own individual expense, in order to ensure that their gene pool is passed on to future generations. Robert Trivers (1971) took this research to the next step by showing how cooperation with unrelated individuals can benefit the altruist as long as one's cooperative or altruistic acts can be expected to be reciprocated in the future. In common terms, this is akin to "what goes around comes around"; doing good works now will allow you to reap rewards later in a society in which reciprocity and reputation are valued.

Taking this concept even further, Nowak and Sigmund (2005) have developed a theory called *indirect reciprocity*, which predicts that people are willing to help a stranger as long as others witness the helpful act, thereby enhancing the altruist's reputation as a cooperative, generous person in the community. This reputation effect works to increase the likelihood that others will be willing to cooperate with the altruist in the future.

Yet an unscrupulous individual could take advantage of a group of collaborators by feigning cooperation, only to dupe them in the end and abscond with benefits beyond what they are due. Human societies have generally established social rules that reward cooperators and punish defectors through ostracism or by other means (for example, think of tax evaders, thieves, and so on). Once defectors are identified, they are typically punished and often banished from the group. Ostracized or banished individuals are less likely to survive and less likely to reproduce. Therefore, individuals with tendencies toward cooperation and

collaboration are able to more effectively reproduce and form societal majorities, and defectors make up a relatively small percentage of individuals in any society. According to scientists, as cooperators pass on their genes, and defectors do so less frequently, our world is evolving into one where cooperation is increasingly common and defection is increasingly less common. Believe it or not, violent crime has gone down in the United States since the 1980s and fewer people are dying from war worldwide than in any previous century.

So why do some individuals fail to cooperate? Neuropsychologists are doing pathbreaking work on the connection between biochemistry and aggression versus altruism in humans and nonhuman animals. When individuals act altruistically, the parts of the brain responsible for human bonding and positive feelings are stimulated. In sum, altruistic acts *feel good* at a biological level in biologically normal people. Similarly, the strength of this response varies among individuals, making some more likely to behave altruistically than others (Vedantam, 2007). Literally, some people are born "helpers." On the other end, multiple studies (Gunnar & Fisher, 2006; University of Chicago Medical Center, 2000) have concluded that levels of cortisol, a hormone in the brain, rise when animals are under stressful conditions in order to help them cope. Chronically low levels of cortisol are correlated with aggressive and antisocial behaviors in human beings, meaning that some people cope more poorly with stress and are prone to act on violent impulses in reaction to stress, particularly children (University of Chicago Medical Center, 2000). Cortisol levels likely have some genetic influence but also can change because of the environment and exposure to chronic stress during pregnancy, infancy, and childhood, when the brain is developing (Gunnar & Fisher, 2006). Children who have been abused or neglected have a higher likelihood of experiencing chronically low levels of cortisol, resulting in antisocial and aggressive tendencies (Gunnar & Fisher, 2006). Some forms of autism have been correlated with unusual levels of cortisol (Brosnan, Turner-Cobb, Munro-Naan, & Jessop, 2009).

Biologists have uncovered important information about the role that oxytocin plays in increasing empathy and trust between individuals or, by contrast, the role it plays in the absence of empathy and trust.

> Researchers found that genetic differences in people's responsiveness to the effects of oxytocin were linked to their ability to read faces, infer the emotions of others, feel distress at others' hardship and even to identify with characters in a role-play exercise. (Angier, 2009, p. D2)

In fact, individuals with one type of oxytocin receptor (type A) are more likely to display signs of autism and poor parenting skills than those with the other type of receptor (type G) (Angier, 2009). So at a very basic level, some individuals are hormonally predisposed to be more or less trusting and empathetic than others. This does not explain trust and empathy in all situations, of course, but it does lay the groundwork for a deeper understanding of these issues. Indeed, some individuals are simply more willing to trust than are others.

For managers this means that some employees and customers will simply be more difficult to deal with than others because they are inherently more aggressive, impulsive, antisocial, or untrusting than others. Rather than taking this behavior as a personal affront to the manager or others, it can be helpful to remember that each person has a different biological endowment that may result in varied coping abilities. Some employees may be better at working collaboratively with others in high-stress environments, whereas some employees may need to have greater isolation from stress or work more independently. This information has many potential implications in the workplace.

Although this summary of evolutionary and biological explanations of trust and cooperation is necessarily short, it indicates that there are likely physical and biological differences that explain why two people react differently to the same situation. This may help us to depersonalize conflict when it occurs, meaning that we need not attribute aggressive or antisocial behaviors as signs of personal affronts but instead understand the myriad reasons why an individual may struggle to behave constructively in difficult situations.

This does not definitively answer the nature-versus-nurture question but it does indicate that the role of nature is likely stronger than previously believed. Understanding the evolution and science of aggression and cooperation is a crucial step for successful conflict management interventions. Although science is just scratching the surface of the nature-nurture debate, this information helps us to better understand that some individuals are simply better at dealing with stress and social interactions than others. Regardless of an individual's natural endowment in these areas, these skills can be increased and improved through a variety of interventions discussed in this book.

The good news is that human beings are significantly more likely to cooperate with others than to take advantage and that cooperation feels "right" to most humans. Cooperation and helping others are the norms, not the exceptions. For individuals with abnormally poor social skills or maladaptive behaviors
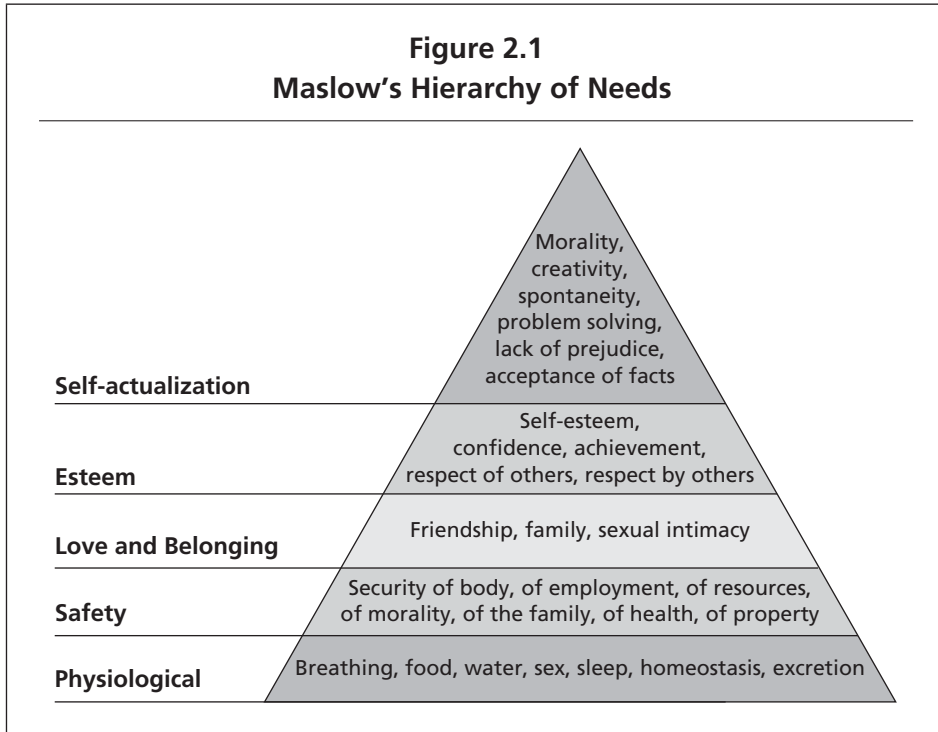
traceable to a medical condition, treatments may be available now or in the near future that will help them improve their ability to interact and cope successfully with stressful situations, particularly when combined with training designed to enhance these skills and abilities. Hiring managers may wish to develop and use scenario-response questions designed to determine how well potential applicants work with others, deal with stress, trust others, are trustworthy, and so on. This information can help ensure an appropriate match among employees, job duties, and team members.

PERSONALITY AND INDIVIDUALLY BASED CONFLICT THEORIES

Individual personalities and previous life experiences may create fertile ground for misunderstandings and conflict. When managers equip themselves with an understanding of the interplay between personality characteristics and conflict behaviors, they can use this information to depersonalize the behaviors of others, to gain a deeper understanding of the motivations underlying those behaviors, and to develop customized approaches for working successfully with individuals displaying a variety of personality traits. We started this discussion in Chapter One with an examination of the conflict styles inventory. In this chapter we will extend this understanding of individual-level responses to conflict including need theories, psychodynamic theories, and other theories.

Need theories refer to those explanations for human behavior, including conflict, based on the unmet needs of individuals. More than fifty years ago Abraham Maslow articulated a theory of human motivation that remains crucial to our understanding of conflict today (see Figure 2.1). According to Maslow (1954), people seek to meet their needs but some needs take precedence over others. To be more specific, physiological needs must be met first, meaning food, water, air, reproduction, sleep, and so on. Safety needs must be met next, meaning freedom from violence, access to employment, security of property and one's family's needs, and so on. Third, humans need to feel that they are loved and have a sense of belonging with family and friends. Fourth, people are motivated to have a sense of positive esteem about themselves and to hold others in esteem. The fifth motivational factor is the desire to be "self-actualized," meaning that people wish to fulfill their potential as creative, moral, intelligent beings. Maslow later added a sixth level of self-transcendence, dealing with an individual's need to understand God, his or her place in the universe, and so on. This last level has not been as well received and accepted as the first five, on which we will focus our attention.

Figure 2.1
Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Self-actualization — Morality, creativity, spontaneity, problem solving, lack of prejudice, acceptance of facts

Esteem — Self-esteem, confidence, achievement, respect of others, respect by others

Love and Belonging — Friendship, family, sexual intimacy

Safety — Security of body, of employment, of resources, of morality, of the family, of health, of property

Physiological — Breathing, food, water, sex, sleep, homeostasis, excretion

It should be noted that some have criticized **Maslow's hierarchy of needs** out of a belief that it is less accurate when applied to collectivist rather than individualist societies (Cianci & Gambrel, 2003). In **collectivist societies**, the needs of the group generally come before the needs of any individual. These cultural differences are reflected in laws and social norms that give priority to the best interests of the group above those of individuals. "Among collectivists, social behavior is guided by the group. Along with group membership come prescribed duties and obligations. Among individualists, one's behavior is guided by one's personal attitudes, motivations, and internal processes" (Neuliep, 2009, p. 46). Therefore, in collectivist societies, Cianci and Gambrel (2003) and others have argued that Maslow's hierarchy would reflect greater emphasis on group belonging, gaining the respect of others, and meeting group needs than on meeting individual needs. Conflicts in collectivist societies are likely to occur more often at the group level rather than between individuals. When individuals experience conflicts in collectivist societies they are more likely to express them

more indirectly and collectively through a web of social alliances and ties designed to enforce norms of expected behaviors and reduce overt conflicts that threaten intergroup and intragroup harmony. We will continue to use the original figure and ideas developed by Maslow and note that outside of a Western cultural context or when applied to individuals from subcultural groups within Western societies, this hierarchy might need to be amended.

How does Maslow's hierarchy of needs help us understand the origins and escalation of conflict for managers? The lower an issue falls on this hierarchy, the more fiercely people and groups will fight for their preferred outcome. For example, union members might enjoy professional development courses as part of their benefits package but they will fight much harder for wages and guarantees of employment because these fall on the lowest rung of the needs hierarchy. Voters may be for or against nuclear power but when the power company tries to locate a new reactor in their neighborhood, they become motivated to organize and lobby for their preference, generally along the lines of "not in my back yard" (also known as the *NIMBY problem*) because local residents fear for their physical safety as well as economic security related to falling property values. When an employee or customer is fighting tooth and nail for a preferred outcome, ask yourself, "What need is motivating this behavior?" Is this a matter of survival (e.g., a job is on the line or one's health is threatened)? Has someone's pride been hurt or is there a potential loss of face at issue? Once you understand the unmet need, then it is possible to better understand the range of potential solutions available to meet that need. Understanding the underlying needs of any party in conflict is the first step to resolution.

PSYCHODYNAMIC THEORIES OF BEHAVIOR AND CONFLICT

This bundle of theories deals with the intrapsychic processes used by individuals to make sense of reality. Originally developed by Sigmund Freud, these theories and concepts have been repeatedly amended by his followers, including Carl Jung and Erich Fromm, among others (Sandy, Boardman, & Deutsch, 2000). For example, people develop control and defense mechanisms designed to "control their impulses, thoughts, actions and realities so that they won't feel anxious, guilty or ashamed. If their controls are ineffective, they develop defensive mechanisms to keep from feeling these disturbing emotions" (Sandy, Boardman, & Deutsch, 2000, p. 290). When a conflict feels overwhelming, individuals may rely on one or

more control and defense mechanisms to control their own potentially negative behavior and to deal with feelings of anxiety that occur when involved in conflicts.

There are a number of common defense mechanisms that even armchair psychologists have typically heard of. Denial occurs when the reality of a situation is so overwhelming that it potentially causes an emotional breakdown. To avoid this potential, one refuses to acknowledge the reality of a situation in order to allow it to sink in slowly, if at all, rather than all at once. Those scoring high on avoidance as a preferred response to conflict (see Chapter One) *may* be prone to more frequent bouts of denial than others. One chooses what one sees by ignoring evidence that possibly contradicts one's preferred vision of the world or of events. By improving one's conflict management skills, it is possible to become more conflict competent, thereby making denial and avoidance less common or less severe. Projection is related to denial and involves projecting one's own characteristics onto another as a defensive behavior. By focusing oneself on the faults of others, one does not need to address them in one's self. **Displacement** involves changing the topic to avoid dealing directly with a problem or acting upset about one issue when it is really a different issue that has caused one's upset (Sandy, Boardman, & Deutsch, 2000). Another way to avoid dealing directly with a problem is to minimize its importance and downplay its significance. **Disassociation** occurs when individuals are emotionally overwhelmed by a situation and therefore have difficulty focusing on that situation. Their minds may wander to more attractive thoughts, such as where to go on vacation or even drift toward making a mental grocery list—anything seen as safe or pleasant. In common terms, they daydream. Overall, people have developed myriad ways to procrastinate in dealing with overwhelming problems, if not to avoid addressing them altogether. If you or your negotiation partners are becoming defensive, it is helpful to determine the true source of the anxiety and work together to address any perceived threats. Defensiveness makes problem solving quite difficult. As discussed later in this chapter, it can be helpful to step back and focus on finding an appropriate process with which to address the problem in order to learn more about the needs of each party and meet those needs through a fair, respectful process. A good process usually ends with a good outcome and can help reduce various forms of denial because it changes the focus away from a potentially feared outcome.

Why do managers need to be aware of various forms of denial? There are common scenarios addressed by managers that are likely to evoke some level of denial,

such as layoffs, mergers, poor performance reviews, or any source of large-scale change. Managers themselves may fall victim to denial when confronted with proof that a trusted employee has violated a deeply held norm. When a valued employee, peer manager, or supervisor has engaged in embezzlement, sexual harassment, or other inappropriate behavior the first impulse is to think, "That can't be possible," even in the face of incontrovertible proof. No one is immune to the pitfall of denial when faced with devastating news.

ATTRIBUTION THEORY AND OTHER COGNITIVE BIASES

When trying to determine a fair outcome, individuals are generally unaware of the many forms of cognitive bias that hamper one's ability to process information efficiently and objectively. **Cognitive bias** is a pattern of deviation in judgment that leads to inaccurate conclusions, distorted perceptions of reality, illogical interpretation of facts or events, and often irrational behaviors or thought patterns (Kahneman & Tversky, 1972). The way our brains process information can lead us to err or exhibit unrecognized biases when making decisions. Cognitive biases often serve as shortcuts to reaching the conclusions necessary to make decisions but the shortcuts may lead to poorer decision making in some circumstances. The first step in conflict management is to heighten your awareness of the existence of common cognitive biases. Acknowledging and addressing these cognitive biases will help us correctly diagnose the sources of conflict as well as identify elements necessary for conflict resolution.

To understand the origins of conflict and its escalation, we must first understand how we attribute motivations to behaviors. When we give someone the benefit of the doubt we assume good intentions or reasons for observed behaviors, thereby making us less likely to become confrontational and more likely to work together to solve problems. Sometimes the opposite occurs. **Attribution theory** explains the ways in which cognitive biases hinder our ability to accurately understand the motivations behind the behaviors of others. There are a host of specific cognitive biases falling under the headings of *attribution theory* or *attribution errors*. **Fundamental attribution errors** occur when we incorrectly attribute someone's behavior to their dispositional or personality characteristics rather than attributing it to a situational factor. For example, imagine that your least favorite coworker arrives late for a Monday morning meeting. In your mind you think, "Apparently she isn't willing to make an effort to be here on time

because she is an inconsiderate person." Later in the day you find out that her car was rear-ended on the way to work. This form of fundamental attribution error is called **accuser bias**, which is "the tendency for an observer negatively affected by an actor's behavior to attribute the behavior to causes under control of the actor" (Allred, 2000, p. 244). You attributed her lateness to her disposition (that is to say an inconsiderate personality) rather than to a situation beyond her control (the auto accident). Research shows individuals are more likely to make a negative attribution error when they have had a negative relationship with the other party, when they are total strangers, and when they come from different cultural groups. Attributing someone's negative behavior to circumstances within his or her control generally results in anger toward that person and conflict escalation. Once angered, parties become less effective at problem solving because high emotions interfere with rational thinking as well as reduce ability to sympathize with others (Allred, 2000).

However, we are more likely to give the benefit of the doubt to people with whom we have a positive relationship history or cultural commonality (e.g., they are part of our in-group). We are most likely to encounter cognitive biases when we seek to understand or explain our own behaviors. Our tendency to downplay our own poor decisions or actions, while attributing them to circumstances beyond our control, is called *bias of the accused* (Allred, 2000). This is akin to what psychologists label *rationalization* or denial, meaning that individuals find rational reasons why their own behaviors make sense under the prevailing circumstances that were beyond their control. "I had to eat that cookie in spite of my diet. I was starving!" If you were the one coming in late to the meeting you would most likely blame it on bad traffic or other causes beyond your control—even if you hit the snooze button on your alarm clock four times that morning.

In other words, every fact that we see (for example, someone is late for the meeting) gets filtered through our preexisting cognitive biases when we take that naked fact and attribute meaning to it. The fact is placed in situational and relational contexts so we can derive its meaning and relevance. Sometimes our preexisting biases drive us to interpret facts incorrectly or jump to conclusions prematurely. In conflict escalation and resolution, it is the perceptions surrounding facts that are keys to understanding the roots of the problem at hand. A negative attribution of a fact is likely to result in an angry response that will make escalation more likely and successful resolution less likely. Awareness of the

existence and functions of cognitive biases can help managers prevent, explain, and diffuse conflict situations when they occur.

THE SEVEN DEADLY COGNITIVE BIASES OF NEGOTIATION

You will read more about negotiation theory in Chapter Three but for now it is helpful to give a brief overview of Bazerman and Neale's (1992) list of seven common decision-making biases that interfere with one's ability to correctly calculate one's own best interests in negotiation or decision making.

The Seven Deadly Cognitive Biases of Negotiators

- Irrational stubbornness
- Zero-sum thinking
- Unduly influenced by an anchoring number
- Framing bias
- Satisficing
- It's all about me
- Overconfidence

The first mistake is to irrationally stick to an initial course of action, even once it becomes clear that this course is no longer the optimal position. This is a classic mistake made in labor-management negotiations. The union makes a public statement proclaiming that nothing short of a 6 percent raise will be accepted and then has difficulty backing down once managers provide data showing their competitors are paying their workers less or that the profit margins simply won't sustain a 6 percent raise. Related to this error is the human tendency to seek out information that confirms our preexisting beliefs and to filter out information that runs contrary to those beliefs (closely related to attribution bias previously discussed). In our labor-management example, this means that union negotiators will have a tendency to discount or disbelieve facts presented by management that bode poorly for their hopes for a 6 percent raise whereas they seek out data

and information that substantiates the need for the requested raise. We'll label this mistake *irrational stubbornness*. It has also been labeled *irrational escalation of commitment* in negotiation literature. This bias also explains why individuals tend to read, watch, or listen to news sources that reflect their own political leanings, thereby reaffirming their existing worldviews and filtering out contrary ideas or interpretations of events. This tendency leads to further polarization and poor decision making.

The second common mistake is zero-sum thinking and it occurs when one assumes that any gain made by the other party in a negotiation must come at your expense, thereby missing opportunities for joint gains that could come from working together in creative problem solving. A variation of this is the tendency to assume there is a competitive situation when, indeed, collaboration may be the best route. A great example of this comes from the holy grail of conflict management literature, *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In*.

> In 1964 an American father and his twelve-year-old son were enjoying a beautiful Saturday in Hyde Park, London, playing catch with a Frisbee. Few in England had seen a Frisbee at that time and a small group of strollers gathered to watch the sport. Finally . . . one Britisher came over to the father: "Sorry to bother you. We have been watching you a quarter of an hour. Who's winning?" (Fisher & Ury, 1981, p. 148)

In many situations, it is possible to accommodate the needs of all parties without necessarily meaning that someone must sacrifice his or her individual goals. Assuming otherwise is a common cognitive error.

The third error is to anchor one's judgments of a "good" or "bad" offer based on the initial offer made instead of linking one's judgment to some objective criteria. You've seen this technique before . . . when the car salesman throws out a wildly high number so that the next number offered seems much more reasonable. The buyer can leave the lot believing she has talked him down to a great extent when the salesman never believed he would achieve success with his initial offer.

More specifically, the first number rendered in a negotiation is called an *anchoring number* and it tends to become the reference point for all future offers. For example, if I offered to sell you my used car for $20,000 but later came down in my demand to $8,000 you might think you were getting a good deal because you are mentally comparing $8,000 to $20,000. But what if the true value of

the car was really only $6,000? Clearly, it is unwise to anchor one's judgment of an outcome to arbitrary figures solely because those figures were used at the early stages of bargaining or decision making. Getting unduly influenced by an anchoring number is a common cognitive bias.

The fourth common mistake is to be positively or negatively influenced by the framing or language used by the other party. The **framing effect** is a cognitive bias that occurs when the same option is presented in different formats or with different phrasing (i.e., it is framed differently) and the choice of format or phrasing unduly influences one's opinions or preferences on the matter (Druckman, 2001). This bias is difficult to avoid because a nice person with a bad offer remains harder to refuse than a rude person with a good offer. The framing of an offer may be akin to "putting lipstick on a pig," but sometimes our minds focus more on the lipstick than the pig—making this a particularly humbling cognitive bias. We'll call this the *framing bias*.

The fifth bias is the overreliance on information that is readily available, even first impressions, rather than doing the digging necessary to get the best data possible. Accepting readily available information saves time and makes sense when a decision is relatively unimportant. However, for important decisions, such as whom to hire or promote or which production method is best, gathering and analyzing information becomes quite important. There are no perfect shortcuts to sound decision making. This tendency was labeled as *satisficing* by Herbert Simon many years ago. This means people tend to take the first acceptable option that comes along rather than do the homework necessary to find the best option. This is a perfectly rational choice when faced with an overwhelming amount of data or information—taking the first good option alleviates the need to sift through a large amount of information. Yet it is important to note that satisficing may not always lead to the most efficient outcome possible.

The sixth bias occurs when the decision maker fails to take into consideration the other's needs and viewpoints. This leads to suboptimal decisions based on false assumptions about the motivations of the other side. In a negotiation, you cannot get what you want unless the other side agrees to it. Unless your proposal meets his needs, your negotiation partner won't agree to anything. Failing to acknowledge the interdependence of negotiators is a cognitive bias that results frequently in **impasse** (also known as *stalemate*). As a result, no agreement is reached. We'll call this bias *it's all about me*.

The seventh and final common cognitive error made by decision makers is simply overconfidence. Study after study has shown that attorneys generally overestimate their chances of winning at trial and this tendency can be found in many other forms of decision making. It is difficult to be objective about our own behaviors or chance of winning. Overconfidence leads to a lack of preparation and effort, including a reduced willingness to seek out new information that contradicts what you think you know or to try to understand the other side's views or needs. Most likely, this bias is related to the psychological concept of denial, mentioned previously. Focusing on the possibility of losing is unpleasant, so individuals overestimate their odds of winning an argument, a legal case, or a negotiation.

SOCIAL LEARNING THEORY

Social learning theory posits that humans are not innately aggressive but that they learn to behave aggressively or peacefully based on observing others in their social environment. People respond to the expected consequences of their behavior, which are learned from experience or observation (Sandy, Boardman, & Deutsch, 2000). For example, if managers in company *x* speak rudely to their subordinates yet they experience no negative repercussions from above, then other managers learn this is acceptable behavior. If an employee sees her colleague coming in late and leaving early with no negative consequences, then she will learn that punctuality is not rewarded in this organization. Positive behaviors also prove instructive. If managers are rewarded for keeping morale high by developing positive relationships with their employees, then others will mimic this behavior as long as they have the intellectual and practical ability to do so.

Using this approach to understanding organizational conflict management, one would observe the behaviors occurring in the workplace, track the consequences of those behavioral choices, and then make changes as necessary to ensure that desired behaviors lead to positive reinforcement and undesirable behaviors lead to negative consequences. This alignment of behaviors and outcomes should occur in ways that allow others in the organization to learn through observation and official policy rather than trial and error.

The theory of social learning means that we must address negative behaviors in the workplace because they have an infectious tendency that can lead to real changes in workplace culture. Yet managers are often hesitant to confront

unproductive or noncollaborative workers. "If we want to have an honest conversation with someone about a problem," Kenneth Cloke and Joan Goldsmith (2003) write, "we need to confront it. If we want to stimulate a significant personal, organizational, societal, or political change, we need to create a minimal level of impoliteness, discourtesy, and unpleasantness. . . . No one learns to confront someone else unless they are willing to make an effort and face the consequences. By not trying, we allow inappropriate behavior to negatively impact everyone within its reach" (p. 196). Employees watch other employees for cues about what behavior is expected or allowed. Failing to intervene with a difficult, abusive, or shirking employee leads to widespread problems within the work unit, as predicted by social learning theory. Therefore, managers need to learn the skills necessary to successfully address these problems: coaching skills, the authority to create incentives for improvements, and negative sanctions for continued poor performance or negative behaviors. Managers may need to terminate or demote an employee who has clearly crossed a line into inappropriate behaviors or after repeated attempts to improve the employee's performance have failed. When managers work proactively to address negative workplace behaviors or attitudes, they need to feel rewarded for that proactive intervention. Unfortunately, many organizations reward conflict avoidance—allowing an employee to continue to violate norms or policies rather than take affirmative action for change. When this happens, other employees realize the "smart guy" is the one who comes late, leaves early, and misappropriates organizational resources (e.g., uses the work vehicle for personal errands or brings office supplies home). Because honest employees are not rewarded and dishonest employees are not punished, the organization's culture may begin a downward spiral if these behaviors are not address by proactive managers. Using the tools in this book, managers will be better equipped to work with "challenging" employees and colleagues, to give them the coaching and skills they need to succeed, and to develop techniques for making difficult decisions in the rare cases in which these skills are insufficient to turn around a poorly performing or misbehaving employee.

In social learning models, "realistic encouragement to achieve ambitious but attainable goals promotes successful experience, which in turn, aids developing the sense of self-efficacy. Social prodding to achieve unattainable goals often produces a sense of failure and undermines self-efficacy" (Sandy, Boardman, & Deutsch, 2000, p. 300). This means that managers can learn a lot from the field of coaching. Players respond better when coaches offer encouragement and

specific advice. Coaches who yell insults at their players or who don't take the time to get to know their strengths and challenges are less effective at setting realistic goals.

FRAMING TOWARD A COLLABORATIVE PROCESS

Framing error was discussed previously. **Framing** refers to the ways in which facts or perceptions are defined, constructed, or labeled. "Framing is a process whereby communicators, consciously or unconsciously, act to construct a point of view that encourages the facts of a given situation to be interpreted by others in a particular manner. Frames operate in four key ways: they define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments, and suggest remedies. Frames are often found within a narrative account of an issue or event, and are generally the central organizing idea" (Kuypers, 2006, p. 7).

How a situation is labeled has a great influence on how people behave. For example,

> in a laboratory setting, when people worked on an activity labeled as an assessment activity (a test of their ability to perform on the task), they were more anxious, and produced lower-quality work and a small quantity of it compared to people who worked on the same activity when it was labeled as a self-development or learning activity. (Katz & Block, 2000, p. 280)

This is an example of the framing effect in action, yet this same cognitive bias may be used to prevent conflict and solve problems constructively. One's perceptions of a situation are directly linked to one's behaviors in response to that situation. For example, if individuals perceive that a situation calls for competition rather than cooperation, then they are likely to behave in ways that are more egocentric, even selfish.

Whether a situation is framed and perceived as one of competition versus collaboration is important in any negotiation—and most conflicts or problem-solving sessions involve negotiation at some level. By framing the situation as calling for joint problem solving (collaboration) rather than a winner-take-all situation (competition), negotiators are often able to think creatively, build and enhance relationships, and work together to reach a more optimal outcome.

Situations can be framed as either competitive or collaborative opportunities. In most negotiations, especially those with ongoing relationships between the

negotiators (as in most workplace settings), a collaborative style tends to be better than a competitive style. Situations may be framed in ways that focus on the process or the outcome of the negotiation. "A process orientation (as compared to an outcome orientation) is likely to lead to more interest in the task, greater effort, less anxiety in the face of challenge, better performance, and higher self-esteem" (Katz & Block, 2000, p. 280).

Process orientations tend to result in greater collaboration whereas a focus on outcomes over process tends to produce competitive orientations. Let's use the process of performance reviews to illustrate this difference. Feedback from one's boss can focus either on the employee's performance relative to others in the organization (a competitive orientation) or it can examine changes or improvements in the employee's own performance. Feedback that compares an employee to others in the company does not necessarily provide the information needed for improvement. "Be more like Bob or Mary" is less effective than specific suggestions about to how to improve one's skills or performance. As the previous quotes from Katz and Block (2000) indicated, framing this feedback as a learning opportunity rather than as a competition with other employees is likely to result in greater improvement.

This principle also applies to goal setting. When employees are given process-related goals their performance improves more than when they are assigned task-related goals. As Katz and Block (2000) note, "People who are oriented toward an outcome goal mainly concentrate on the final result or outcome; as a consequence they are preoccupied with their position [or their demand]" (p. 283). The more individuals feel a need to clarify, reiterate, or reassert their own positions, the less time they spend trying to meet the underlying concerns of the other party. When people focus instead on a process goal, they devote their energy to developing a mastery of that process, which usually leads to a more successful resolution of the conflict or problem (Fisher & Ury, 1981; Katz & Block, 2000). Think of Google's instructions to its employees: "Take risks, make mistakes." Rather than telling employees that they must generate a specific level of profit or develop new products at a certain rate, they are given a process goal that encourages them to experiment and think creatively.

In another example, a company that sells cell phones and cell minutes on a pay-as-you-go model noted their Hispanic employees had consistently higher sales than the nonbilingual employees. All Spanish-speaking callers were automatically routed to Spanish-speaking employees, so this was not a linguistic barrier.

Managers thought that perhaps the Spanish-speaking customers were just more free spending than the English-speaking customers. To test this hypothesis, some of the Spanish-speaking (bilingual) sales representatives were offered overtime to take extra calls with English-speaking customers. To the managers' surprise, sales to English-speaking customers increased significantly when they were given a bilingual sales representative. Why the difference? Because all the sales calls are recorded, the managers began poring over the calls and comparing the data. It turns out that the Spanish-speaking and bilingual sales reps spent slightly more time on each call—getting to know their customers. This allowed them to build rapport as well as better understand the products and services that would best serve them. This slight increase in call length was more than made up for in profits from increased sales. In the end, it was a difference in cultural tendencies that resulted in greater profits generated from the Hispanic sales reps. Based on this information, the company managers decided to give greater training to their English-speaking reps. That training included a process orientation with specific information about how the call center employees can build relationships with their customers, listen to them, and thereby improve their individual sales as well as customer satisfaction with the sales experience. Employees were encouraged to try various techniques as a learning exercise in order to see which ones worked the best for them as individual sales reps. Sales soared.

PROCEDURAL JUSTICE AND THE PROCESS FOCUS

When customers, clients, or employees experience conflicts they often claim the status quo isn't fair or that they aren't being treated fairly. **Fairness** can be defined as the quality of being just, equitable, impartial, or evenhanded. Fairness can refer to the process through which decisions were made and the outcome of those decisions. There may be many contradictory viewpoints about what comprises a "fair" outcome depending on one's preference for equity, equality, or need-based outcomes. Concepts of justice and fairness are central to our understanding of conflict and are keys to its resolution. Humans and other primates have an innate sense of fairness and react negatively when they feel they are being treated unfairly (Markey, 2003). An interesting example of the deep roots of our need for fairness comes from a study of capuchin monkeys by the Yerkes Primate Research Center at Emory University (2003). Capuchin monkeys were trained to give a researcher a pebble in return for a small piece of food, usually a slice of

cucumber. However, capuchin monkeys prefer grapes to cucumbers. Researchers placed pairs of capuchins next to each other so they could watch the exchanges taking place between their neighbor and the researchers. The first monkey was given a grape in reward for handing over a pebble. The next monkey was given a piece of cucumber as a reward for handing over the pebble. This equates to equal work (giving a pebble) for unequal pay (grape versus cucumber). The capuchins receiving cucumbers instead of grapes reacted by either throwing their cucumbers back at the researchers or simply refusing to eat the cucumbers. Capuchin pairs who saw only cucumbers exchanged for pebbles ate their cucumbers happily (Markey, 2003). This research demonstrates that humans and other animals have developed understandings of fairness that have enabled them to work together successfully in groups. Fairness matters. A perceived lack of fairness leads to anger, resentment, and conflict within human and primate groups.

The **theory of relative deprivation** explains the fairness concerns held by the capuchin monkeys in our previous example. The capuchins were perfectly satisfied with exchanging the pebbles for cucumbers until they saw another capuchin receive a grape for the same service. The theory of relative deprivation states that a sense of injustice can arise when one compares one's distribution to others in a competitive environment and sees that others are receiving more. In modern society this has led to competitive materialistic pursuits often called the need to "keep up with the Joneses." This explains why many private employers ask their employees to avoid discussing their individual pay rates with one another. For public sector employees, wage rates and salaries are public record—making these discussions about relative pay more frequent and giving rise to frequent discussions about fairness.

Yet fairness can mean different things to different people and is influenced by situational factors. Would the capuchins react differently if the grapes were given to mothers with small offspring and the cucumbers were reserved for those without dependents to feed? In order to better understand what we mean by fairness we must examine the concepts of procedural and distributive justice.

Procedural justice refers to the fairness of the process used for reaching a decision or resolving a conflict. Individuals tend to perceive that a process is fair when it is transparent, respectful, and allows them to be heard during decision making:

> One wants procedures that generate relevant, unbiased, accurate, consistent, reliable, competent, and valid information and decisions as well as polite,

dignified, and respectful behavior in carrying out the procedures. Also voice and representation in the processes and decisions related to the evaluation are considered desirable by those directly affected by the decisions. (Deutsch, 2000b, p. 45)

Think of this example: your boss issues a memo to all employees that details a new dress code that he has devised for the entire organization. This new dress code will require some minor changes and a slight expense to you personally. How do you feel about this decision? What if the memo stated the new dress code was created by a committee composed of five employees and three managers from different parts of the organization? What if the memo reminded you that those delegates were chosen by a vote from each employee group? Does this change how you feel about the decision? Typically individuals can accept, abide by, and even help implement a policy decision they do not like as long as they feel the process used to reach it was fair, transparent, and they had a reasonable opportunity to participate. Therefore, between the two types of justice, attention to procedural justice concerns typically increases the likelihood that parties will accept and support decisions.

Distributive justice refers to the criteria that lead people to feel that they have received a fair outcome. Perceptions of distributive justice generally hinge on one of three criteria for determining the fairness of an outcome: equity, equality, or need (Deutsch, 2000b). The **equity principle** denotes that benefits should be distributed based on each person or group's contribution; those who worked harder or contributed greater expertise to a project should receive disproportionate amounts of the payout. The **equality principle** states that all group members should receive equal amounts of any good or benefit that comes from the labors of the group. Under this version of fairness, all employees would receive the same pay. The **need principle** asserts that more of the goods or benefits should go to those who need more. Therefore, a parent with three young children might receive greater pay or fewer taxes than someone with no children at all. These principles can be seen as the organizing principles underlying the capitalist, socialist, and communist economic and political systems, respectively. In practice, capitalist societies still pay some attention to need-based distributive principles through the provision of social welfare policies, such as food stamps or housing assistance, but they do so to a smaller extent than in socialist or communist societies. Based on your individual political culture, you will be prone to believe that one of these is more efficient and morally correct than the

others in the majority of situations. According to Deutsch (2000b), the equity principle is most often called on when the goal is economic productivity. Workers have greater incentive to work hard when hard workers receive more pay than shirkers and when they know there are few government services to guarantee their livelihoods otherwise. The equality principle is used in situations in which social harmony and positive social relationships are the highest goal. The need principle is followed when the most important goal is ensuring human welfare.

In any particular situation, individuals rely on one of these definitions of outcome fairness to support their argument for a different outcome distribution than they are slated to receive. "Officer, it is not fair that I get the speeding ticket! That car ahead of me was going much faster than my car" (appealing to the equality principle). "Officer, I should not have to pay such a huge speeding fine. I won't be able to make my rent payment" (appealing to the need principle).

When examining competing claims of fairness, it is helpful to dig more deeply into the underlying definitions of fairness by asking each party (or ourselves if we are a party), "What makes you say it is fair or unfair? What criteria are you using to determine fairness in this situation? What would a fair outcome look like and how could it be attained?" It can be helpful to be metacognitive with the parties, meaning that you take the time to explain to them the various types of fairness and ask them to analyze their own claims to see which type of fairness undergirds them. This allows space to build an understanding that people can hold differing preferences for an outcome but both outcomes can be defended as fair under the equity, equality, or need principle. This lays the groundwork for a respectful discussion of possible outcomes that does not privilege one viewpoint over another or dehumanize one negotiator as patently unconcerned with fairness.

How do theories of distributive and procedural justice affect conflict and its resolution for managers? Clearly, feelings of injustice and unfairness give rise to much of the world's conflict. Decision-making procedures that lack transparency and do not allow participatory input from stakeholders or fail to uphold procedural rules often result in a backlash. When managers are acting as mediators between two employees in conflict or when they facilitate a decision-making meeting, it can be helpful to use a process-focused approach, similar to that used by mediators: "The mediator can encourage the sides to focus on such processes as finding common ground, developing mutual understandings, empowering one another, and understanding each other's needs and emotions.

Doing so encourages using fair tactics and constructive strategies to resolve the conflict" (Katz & Block, 2000, p. 285). Although it is counterintuitive, it can be helpful to remind employees that they are more likely to reach their preferred outcome if they focus instead on walking through a thoughtful and fair process of discussion and information sharing. This process focus, rather than an outcome focus, is most likely to build and enhance working relationships and achieve outcomes that meet their needs.

Distributing Raises Fairly

Recently, a high school principal at a private school asked a conflict management consultant to conduct an assessment to determine the reasons why her staff seemed frequently disgruntled. That assessment revealed, in part, that teachers were dissatisfied because the merit bonuses were distributed in ways that seemed unfair. Teachers with seniority wanted their loyalty rewarded. Teachers who worked a lot of overtime to improve and update their lectures and materials wanted their efforts recognized. Teachers whose students scored highest on standardized tests wanted recognition for this achievement. Young teachers who had student loans to repay stated a greater need for the merit pay increases. With so many competing criteria, the principal had been distributing raises without any clear criteria to define *merit* or *fair*. Each teacher defined a fair distribution in ways that privileged his or her own situation, giving rise to a no-win situation for the principal. How should the principal proceed?

CONCEPTS OF FAIRNESS ACROSS CULTURES

In addition to the three types of fairness defined previously, it should be noted that different cultural groups tend to exhibit generalized preferences for one of the three types. This means that individuals within a cultural group will continue to exhibit individualized differences in the type of fairness they prefer but the majority in each cultural group will tend to prefer one of these three types of fairness over the others.

Individualistic societies are those in which the needs, rights, and responsibilities of the individual are prioritized above those of the group or community.

In these societies, it is generally considered positive for individuals to stand out from their peers through individual achievements, whereas in collectivist societies it is less appropriate for individuals to stand out from the crowd. In individualistic societies, members are encouraged to be independent from others, support themselves financially, make decisions for themselves, and deal with the outcome of their decisions, whether it is good or bad. Individualists believe that people are largely in control of their own fate and through hard work nearly any goal can be achieved. This closely matches the definition of a concept known as *locus of control* from the field of psychology. An **internal locus of control** means that individuals believe they are in control of events that affect themselves, rather than being controlled by external forces such as God, the environment, or those in powerful positions. Individuals with an **external locus of control** believe that they are controlled by factors external to themselves such as a higher power, the environment, political forces, and so on. Individualists put their faith in individuals' abilities to master their environment and make decisions or take actions that result in positive outcomes for the individual. Therefore, it follows logically that in individualistic societies, distributions based on need are less supported than other definitions of fairness and the equity principle is typically preferred. Because individuals are thought to be able to control their environments through good decision making and hard work, an equity distribution makes the most sense.

In collectivist societies, in which individual identities are based on ties to the group or community, it is more common to share resources based on equality or need. In collectivist societies, belief in an external locus of control is more common. For example, in Russia, Liberia, or China an individual's fate might have more to do with the family one is born into or the political climate (e.g., whether your family is politically well connected or whether there is peace and stability or war). Even getting to work on time might have more to do with luck than individual choice because the public buses might be unreliable or run off schedule. In truth, in developing economies or in war-torn regions, it is likely more true that an individual's fate lies more heavily with factors beyond his or her own control due to societal inequity, random violence, and corrupt political systems. Collectivist societies tend to believe that it is fair to distribute the costs of education, health care, parenthood, and so on across society as a whole rather than to allow persons to shoulder these burdens individually. They may use a web of social relationships to get ahead but rarely do they believe individuals will succeed or fail solely based on their own efforts.

As a manager in a multicultural workplace it is important to understand why employees behave as they do. The locus of control concept helps us understand why employees may have culturally based differences in their concepts of fairness. It also helps us to understand preferences for team-based or individually based assignments. Individuals from each different perspective tend to get frustrated in dealing with the other: those with a high internal locus of control find their opposites to be indecisive and slow to act. Those with a high external locus of control find their opposites exhibit a high degree of hubris or consider them egotistical. Understanding these different worldviews and views of self can be helpful in finding fair and productive ways to work together.

In sum, our cultural affiliations and identities shape how we see the world and how we view fairness. Managers need to take the time to ask their colleagues and employees about their perceptions and to explain their own. Workplaces develop their own cultural norms as well. Having a fair, transparent, and participatory process to make joint decisions, when appropriate, can provide an opportunity to build deeper relationships and understandings among those with whom we share our work lives.

POWER IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

Traditionally, power has been defined as the ability to accomplish one's goals over the objections of others if necessary. Powerful people were those who had the ability to force their will on others. In a modern managerial setting, *power* can be defined as the ability to act effectively (Folger, Poole, & Stutman, 2000). This definition means you have the ability to communicate your vision for the organization or your unit, solicit buy-in for that vision, and empower your employees and teams to work effectively toward a shared goal.

Power structures in most organizations are evolving from strict hierarchical designs into systems with disbursed power centers, delegated decision-making authority, and collaborative work products. Bill Ury, in an introduction to Mark Gerzon's book *Leading Through Conflict*, writes, "A generation or two ago, it is fair to say, most decisions were made hierarchically. The people on the top gave the orders and the people on the bottom simply followed them. That is changing. Nowadays, leaders increasingly cannot simply give orders and expect them to be carried out" (Gerzon, 2006, p. xi). As Cloke and Goldsmith (1997) note, "There is a clear evolutionary pattern of movement from management based

on authoritarian principles to leadership based on democratic values" (p. 161). Understanding the evolving nature of power is central to effective managers in the twenty-first century.

Increasingly, power over others has been replaced by power with others. "Social power stems from relationships among people" (Folger, Poole, & Stutman, 2000, p. 120). Managers are able to exercise their power and authority when others view their exercise of power as legitimate and useful. In effect, they endorse the manager's power. Building positive relationships with one's subordinates, peers, and supervisors is crucial to building and maintaining power as a manager. Positive relationships mean that others are likely to give you the benefit of the doubt when difficult decisions need to be made. Managers who abuse their power or authority by treating people disrespectfully or by repeatedly making decisions that are contrary to group expectations and preferences are likely to lose power, especially their ability to convince others to support and implement their decisions.

A host of resources come together to determine one's power: access to resources, knowledge, special skills, access to professional contacts and networks, control over rewards or sanctions, communication skills including persuasiveness, empathy, and even one's personality can contribute to one's power. These facets of power are often conditional and change from one setting to another. A three-star general can move armies at work but may not be able to win every argument at home. Even dictators can be toppled by a coup. The best managers have power because others in the organization want to please them, employees want to help them enact their vision for the organization, and they have built a reputation for fairness, collegiality, and effectiveness. Not only is power *with* others more successful than power *over* others, it also feels better.

When deciding which battles to fight and which to let go, it is helpful to engage in a brief analysis of the contextual power dynamics of the situation. Who has the most power? How important is this issue to him or her? How much power do you have to affect the outcome? This assessment includes the power of your connections with others and your access to resources, including knowledge. What are the costs versus the benefits of your preferred outcome compared to other possible outcomes? And finally, is there a high-quality process that the decision makers might follow to allow them to arrive at the optimal outcome? Would it be helpful to have the decision-making group brainstorm all possible actions and weigh the costs and benefits? Should stakeholders be involved in

the decision-making process? You might be surprised and find out that you change your own mind about the preferred outcome once you engage in a clear problem-solving process that includes an analysis of power.
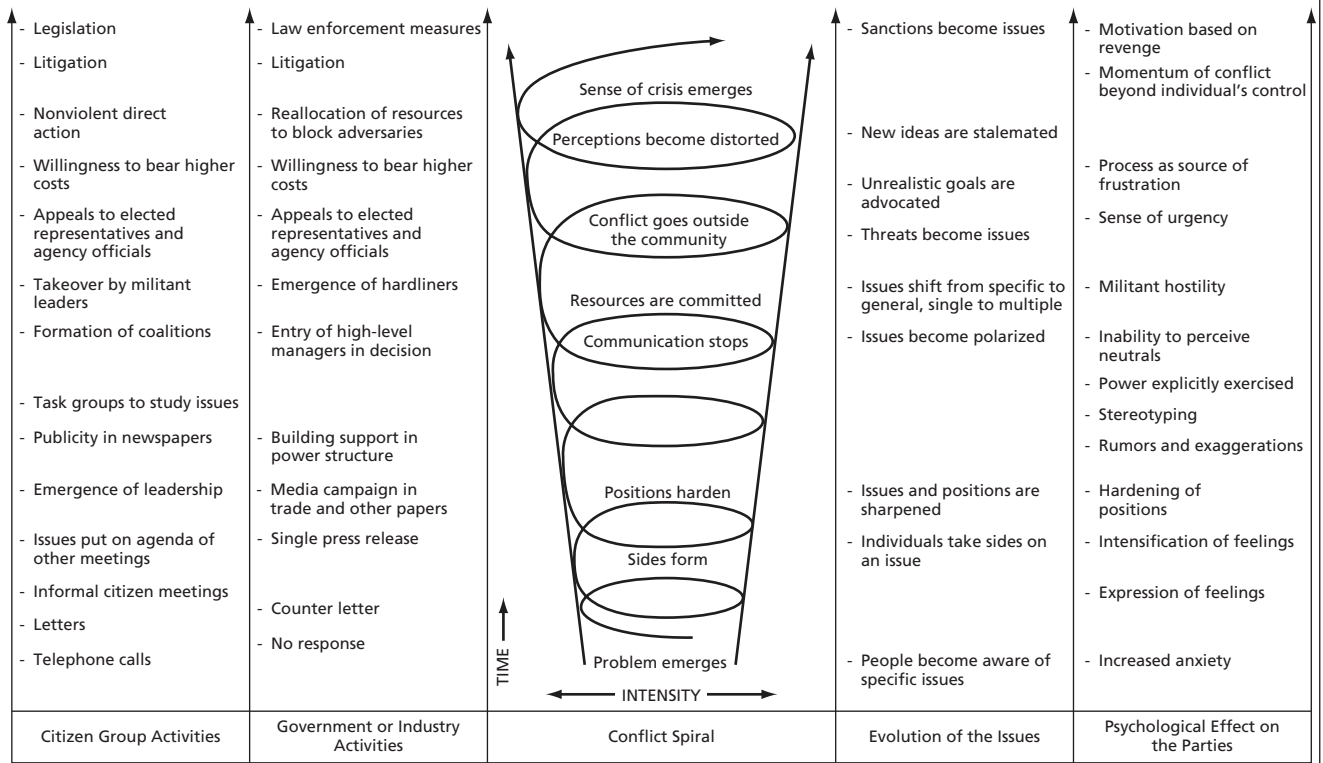
THE TIMING OF CONFLICT INTERVENTIONS

When should managers or neutral conflict resolvers (for example, mediators, facilitators, or others) intervene in conflicts to seek a resolution? Timing may not be everything but it certainly is important. Intervene too early and there may not be enough information to tell you who the parties are and what the problem is really about. Intervene too late and tempers have already grown hot and hard feelings may make resolution difficult. Conflict managers call this the problem of *ripeness*.

Figure 2.2 displays the spiral of unmanaged conflict. Although originally developed to explain public policy disputes, the concepts are also well applied in the workplace. Intervene too early and no one wants to participate. Intervene too late and it is difficult to undo the damage already done by the conflict.

Once sides have formed, positions begin to harden. Cognitive biases, including attribution bias, work to filter out information that runs contrary to our own view of the problem or the other parties. Eventually, we refuse to communicate with the other side. Once communication stops, we are more likely to fall prey to attribution bias. At this point, parties often expend resources to hire an attorney or build their case against the other side. They take the conflict outside the immediate parties by telling their story to others, looking for allies elsewhere in the organization or the broader community, or even going to the press or using a hotline to report complaints. Perceptions of the dispute and of the other parties become distorted by the lack of information flowing between them. At this point, if not earlier, a sense of crisis emerges and one or more parties comes to believe that a resolution is needed right away. They want to be proved right, make the other side pay for what they have done, and so on. This need for revenge, justice, and resolution means that they are now willing to pay whatever it takes, or whatever they can pay, to get it resolved. Ironically, intervention at this stage is likely to be less successful than intervention at an earlier stage, before significant resources were committed and communication stopped. The trick for interventionists, including managers, is to allow the dispute to ripen enough to increase the chance of successful intervention, but not so late that the dispute has gotten highly escalated.

Figure 2.2
The Spiral of Unmanaged Conflict

Citizen Group Activities	Government or Industry Activities	Conflict Spiral	Evolution of the Issues	Psychological Effect on the Parties
- Legislation	- Law enforcement measures		- Sanctions become issues	- Motivation based on revenge
- Litigation	- Litigation			- Momentum of conflict beyond individual's control
- Nonviolent direct action	- Reallocation of resources to block adversaries	Sense of crisis emerges	- New ideas are stalemated	
- Willingness to bear higher costs	- Willingness to bear higher costs	Perceptions become distorted	- Unrealistic goals are advocated	- Process as source of frustration
- Appeals to elected representatives and agency officials	- Appeals to elected representatives and agency officials	Conflict goes outside the community	- Threats become issues	- Sense of urgency
- Takeover by militant leaders	- Emergence of hardliners	Resources are committed	- Issues shift from specific to general, single to multiple	- Militant hostility
- Formation of coalitions	- Entry of high-level managers in decision	Communication stops	- Issues become polarized	- Inability to perceive neutrals
				- Power explicitly exercised
- Task groups to study issues				- Stereotyping
- Publicity in newspapers	- Building support in power structure			- Rumors and exaggerations
- Emergence of leadership	- Media campaign in trade and other papers	Positions harden	- Issues and positions are sharpened	- Hardening of positions
- Issues put on agenda of other meetings	- Single press release	Sides form	- Individuals take sides on an issue	- Intensification of feelings
- Informal citizen meetings	- Counter letter			- Expression of feelings
- Letters	- No response			
- Telephone calls		Problem emerges	- People become aware of specific issues	- Increased anxiety

TIME ↑

INTENSITY

In a managerial setting, it can be helpful to allow employees some time to attempt to resolve their own interpersonal conflicts before intervening. When employees reach their own resolution and handle their own conflicts, it can (re)build relationships and increase their conflict resolution skills. Yet, conflicts between two employees can quickly become a conflict among ten employees when others take sides or the problem morphs from an interpersonal conflict to an intergroup conflict. In conflicts between customers and clients and employees, it is best to allow employees some specific remedies they can offer in order to resolve the dispute at the lowest level possible. This means the unsatisfied customer needs only to speak with one employee rather than be transferred to a manager. Both customers and employees tend to be happier when small problems can be resolved at the lowest levels without taking a disproportionate amount of time.

STRUCTURAL VERSUS NONSTRUCTURAL SOURCES OF CONFLICT

When people experience conflict at work or with clients, they tend to blame it on the other person's personality flaws or otherwise chalk it up to causes beyond their own control (review denial and attribution bias covered previously in this chapter). Often the conflict is attributed to a personality conflict. To become adept at managing collaboration and conflict you must develop the ability to diagnose the sources of conflict in much the same way that a physician diagnoses the cause of an illness. Information about the root cause of a dispute can be indispensable in crafting an effective response. The first step in the diagnostic process is to determine whether the source is structural or nonstructural. **Structural sources of conflict** include unfair, unclear, or inefficient policies, procedures, organizational cultures, or ingrained practices that repeatedly give rise to disputes irrespective of personnel changes. High levels of employee and customer dissatisfaction are nearly always indicators of structural sources of conflict within an organization. A few examples will help to illustrate the most common structural sources of conflict within an organization:

- Overlapping job descriptions that create turf battles or conflict between employees who are left unclear as to which tasks are to be accomplished by themselves or others
- Organizational cultures that encourage or fail to punish racism, sexism, harassment, bullying, or other recurring negative workplace behaviors

- Rewards for individual achievement that encourage no-holds-barred competition between members of the same team such as stealing clients from one another or sabotaging the work of one's colleague in order to increase one's chance of winning the monthly sales competition

- Failures to recognize and reward desired behaviors among individual employees and teams

- Incentives to use or lose one's sick time or vacation time resulting in mass absenteeism near the end of the year

- Unrealistically high performance goals or objectives

- Performance goals or policy changes that are not communicated clearly along the entire chain of command

- Any policy, procedure, or cultural norm that misaligns the needs of the individual and the needs of the whole organization

- An absence of mechanisms for informal employee or customer dispute resolution, thereby incentivizing formal actions, such as litigation, as the only venue for redress

Understanding structural conflicts is all about understanding incentive structures. Sometimes organizations create policies or procedures that have unintended consequences. To elaborate, let's look at an entire subset of conflict based on poor procedures, policies, and practices: those that misalign the good of the individual and the good of the organization. For example, in order to save money, an organization may create a policy stating that all sick leave or vacation time must be used by the end of the year and will not roll over. This gives employees the incentive to use it or lose it, even if this means the organization is understaffed near the end of the year and employees call in sick when they aren't really ill.

A second example: imagine a company that installs and services burglar alarm systems for corporations and government offices. In order to respond quickly to customers, the technicians are told they must reply to e-mails or voicemails within ten minutes. In order to avoid reprimands from their managers, technicians are taking calls and answering e-mails while driving between customer sites. In order to abide by the new policy, they must violate the state's driving laws and common sense. This increases the number of car accidents, worker's compensation claims, and overall liability for the entire company. Even if the company terminates the employment of those with two or more accidents or traffic citations, the

policy provides negative incentives for all the technicians to continue these conflict-causing behaviors.

In nearly all cases, high employee or client turnover can be traced to structural sources of conflict. If your organization has terminated the "bad apples" and the problem remains, then the source of the conflict is likely structural rather than due to a few bad personalities. Sabotage, theft, and apathy that are widespread within a company indicate a need for cultural change rather than simply terminating individual employees. Structural sources of conflict mean the conflict will recur repeatedly until the source of the conflict is addressed.

Nonstructural sources of conflict happen one time or rarely, occurring as isolated events that could not have been predicted or avoided. These are usually resolved by taking action to address the individual problem rather than creating or changing policies across the organization: the employee who can't show up on time or does not treat his coworkers appropriately even after retraining or coaching, the two team members who simply cannot get along with each other but who seem to work well with others. In these instances retraining, discipline, or termination may be in order.

When dealing with nonstructural (i.e., individual) sources of conflict, don't fall into what I label the *elementary school discipline trap*. For example, when one child misbehaves or lollygags in the halls during a trip to the restroom, the principal changes the rules so that individuals can no longer make these trips on their own. Instead, each classroom is assigned two times during the day when they are allowed to use the restroom together as a group. Everyone is punished for the misbehavior of one or a few members rather than dealing directly with those who misbehave. Large organizations tend to do this rather than respond as needed to misbehaving individuals. Ironically, this stems from a desire for conflict avoidance—rather than deal directly with the wrongdoer, the organization creates a blanket policy for the whole organization.

Training for Everyone!

A male employee was accused of sexual harassment by three different female employees on three or more separate occasions. Each female employee

thought she was the only woman being harassed by this offender. Rather than disciplining or terminating the offender, the company hired a sexual harassment trainer and required that all employees, including the three victims and the offender, attend this training together. During the training, the women shared their experiences and realized they had similar experiences. In the end, the harasser was left undisciplined and the entire workforce sat through a training that most of them didn't need. The victims felt further victimized by being forced to take this training, as if they had done something wrong. They filed a joint suit against the company, costing more than $200,000 in claims and legal fees. A year later, two additional women left the organization after being sexually harassed by the same male employee.

CONCLUSION

This brief introduction to the theories and terminology of conflict management was designed to present the conceptual frameworks and ideas that will make sense of the chapters to come. These theories are organized from those existing within one's own mind all the way to intergroup conflict. Although a diverse array of theories was presented, in my experience, these are the most indispensable theories for understanding and intervening in destructive conflict within and between organizations. Before managers can create methods to prevent or resolve unproductive conflict they first need to know why and how it arises, evolves, and dissipates. When managers understand the biological and evolutionary sources of conflict and cooperation, they see the root causes of human behaviors and learn to depersonalize challenging behaviors from employees or customers. When they understand procedural justice they gain critical insights about the procedures for gaining buy-in for important decisions that will need to be implemented by employees across the organization. When managers understand differing worldviews and definitions related to fairness, they learn there are many fair ways to distribute resources or solve problems and that communicating these perspectives can lead to deeper understandings between employees and better relationships. Through an examination of the evolving nature of power relations between managers and employees, collaborative managers learn how to motivate people through cooperation, mutual respect, and genuine understanding—the

ultimate source of power for leaders. When managers act as diagnosticians who see conflict as a symptom of a deeper problem, they become able to diagnose and change the underlying structures that give rise to unproductive and recurring conflicts.

ELISE AND MAIN STREET BAKERIES: BEN'S TRIP TO STORE NUMBER SEVENTY-FIVE

As Ben boards the flight to deal with the problem at store number seventy-five, he is already building a list of likely causes in his head: Janice, the manager of that store, may be driving other employees away. The last two times Ben has called Janice he has left voicemail messages because she was too busy to talk to him and she did not bother calling him back. She is probably avoiding him. Ben hates it when others treat him disrespectfully. No matter how busy she is, she could at least call him back. Store number seventy-five is taking up more of his time than the other stores. That is not fair to those managers who are seeking more training, advice, or other resources from HR.

When Ben arrived, he contacted the last two assistant managers who quit and arranged to meet them for coffee. He asked them, ''What would make store number seventy-five a better place to work? What would make it a place where people like you would want to build your careers?'' Both assistant managers told the same story. Janice, the store manager, works herself to death. She is so afraid the assistant managers won't make the right decisions that she refuses to delegate anything. The assistant managers are treated like glorified cashiers. The assistant managers are told what to do and how to do it but their input is never sought. Janice won't take the time to listen to their ideas for improvement. When changes are made, the assistant managers are not informed about the reasons for the changes, nor are they informed about policy changes coming from corporate headquarters. There is a lack of communication from the top down and certainly from the bottom up. Assistant managers want to be problem solvers but their scope of authority is so limited they end up frustrated—always needing to go to the manager to get problems solved. The assistant managers are unclear about their full job descriptions or the ways in which their performance will be evaluated.

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When it comes time for the manager to distribute merit bonuses, the assistant managers both claim that Janice does this in an unfair manner that lacks transparency. No one knows why some employees get more than others and they suspect favoritism. Some employees wonder if it is because the manager seems to get along better with those employees who are most like her (e.g., gender, race, religion, etc.). Additionally, the store lacks a friendly, collegial atmosphere. Employees at store number seventy-five come to work and leave eight hours later. They do not build relationships or support each other as colleagues and friends. The environment is lonely and frustrating, so most assistant managers do not stay long.

KEY TERMS

Accuser bias

Attribution theory

Bias of the accused

Cognitive bias

Collectivist societies

Disassociation

Displacement

Distributive justice

Equality principle

Equity principle

External locus of control

Fairness

Framing

Framing effect

Fundamental attribution errors

Impasse

Individualistic societies

Internal locus of control

Maslow's hierarchy of needs

Need principle

Need theories

Nonstructural sources of conflict

Procedural justice

Rationalization

Structural sources of conflict

Theory of relative deprivation

SUGGESTED SUPPLEMENTAL READING

Axelrod, R. (1984). *The evolution of cooperation*. New York: Basic Books.

Birke, R. (2010). Neuroscience and settlement: An examination of scientific innovations and practical applications. *Ohio State Journal on Dispute Resolution*, *25*(2), 477–529.

Elangovan, A. (1998). Managerial intervention in organizational disputes: Testing a prescriptive model of strategy selection. *International Journal of Conflict Management*, *9*(4), 301–335.

Jones, W., & Hughes, S. H. (2003). Complexity, conflict resolution, and how the mind works. *Conflict Resolution Quarterly*, *20*, 485–494. doi: 10.1002/crq.42.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How useful (or not useful) is a knowledge of conflict theory for managers? What is the connection between these theories and your practical management decisions?

2. Think of a conflict that has been in the news recently. Which of these theories best explains why the conflict arose or the choices parties to the conflict have made? Discuss the pros and cons of different theories as explanations for these events.

EXERCISES

1. First, go to "Elise and Main Street Bakeries: Ben's Trip to Store Number Seventy-Five" at the end of this chapter. Go through each paragraph and identify every form of cognitive bias or conflict theory you can find. Then develop a list of possible remedies that Ben can recommend to Elise that will reduce the sources of unproductive conflict. Remember—getting rid of the manager is not the first or only option on this list.

2. Think of a performance-review process you have experienced, either as the reviewer or as the employee being reviewed. How would it have been different if it took a collaborative and procedural orientation? Brainstorm questions for a performance review that encourages employees to compare their current performance to past performance and set future goals for improvement tied to current and past performance rather than being tied to a comparison of other employees in the company. You can do this individually or in small groups.

3. You are the manager of your work unit and you just learned that you must lay off one of your ten employees. You are not part of a unionized workplace and you have full discretion to decide whom to let go. Which standard of fairness will you use and why? Which factors will you include in your decision-making process and which will you exclude? Discuss this among others to see how many fair decision-making criteria you can come

up with. What kind of fairness does each criterion speak to? Why would different managers come up with different criteria?

4. Imagine you are a manager for a corporation, government agency, or nonprofit organization (pick whichever applies to you). You need to speak to an employee who is underperforming. How would you frame the situation to maximize the employee's chances for improvement? How might you create goals and measure progress toward those goals using a collaborative process orientation rather than a competitive orientation?

5. Alex, Pat, and Sandy own a consulting business together. They just completed a job that brought in $2,400 to their company (after expenses). Alex is a semiretired former executive. His contacts brought the business to the company but he only worked six hours on the project. Pat is single and has no kids. She worked twelve hours on the project. She has much less experience in this area than Alex. Sandy is a single parent with three kids and a lot of student loans. Her hectic schedule meant that she could only work six hours on the project. Like Pat, she has much less experience with this work than Alex. How should the money from this project be distributed and which definition of fairness does your preferred outcome represent? Once completed, analyze your answers to see which definition of fair you used (T. K. Hedeen, personal conversation, 2011).

GOAL SETTING

For the next week, make some notes about the conflict you have. Which conflict style did you use to address the conflict and which theories explain how the conflict arose and progressed. Then, set one goal for the upcoming week that you believe will help you more efficiently match your conflict response to the conflict itself. Try to address the conflict before it gets too high on the spiral of unmanaged conflict and see what earlier resolution can achieve. Set some goals that specifically incorporate your new knowledge of conflict styles and conflict theories.