

# Chapter 8

## Conflict

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*Peace is not the absence of conflict but the presence of creative alternatives for responding to conflict—alternatives to passive or aggressive responses, alternatives to violence.*

–Dorothy Thompson

### Introduction

The goal of this chapter is to (1) provide insight into the sources and dynamics of conflict in multicultural teams and (2) review some fundamental competencies in self-awareness and communication that can facilitate engagement with conflict in groups. The chapter integrates thematic perspectives from the fields of Conflict Resolution/Transformation, Intercultural Communication, and Organizational Behavior.

### Learning Objectives

After reading this chapter you should be able to:

- Analyze the causes of conflict in multicultural teams
- See the constructive as well as destructive potential of conflict
- Assess diverse personal styles and cultural norms for addressing conflict
- Begin to identify your own personal and cultural style of dealing with conflict
- Recognize how conflicts are integral to natural stages of group development
- Distinguish between task and relationship conflict
- Assess some social-psychological dynamics of identity-based conflicts
- Define terminology and concepts in the field of Conflict Transformation
- Introduce basic principles of negotiation, mediation, intervention, and peacebuilding
- Identify communication skills for dialogue about a conflict

## Defining Conflict

Conflict is a natural part of social existence and destined to be a reality for human beings working together. In the field of Conflict Resolution, *conflicts* have been defined as deep-rooted differences that are hard to resolve, versus simpler and easier to settle *disputes* (Burton 1986; Burgess and Spangler 2003). On a multicultural team, negotiable disputes are more prevalent than non-negotiable conflicts, but are often based on fundamentally different needs, interests, perceptions, or cultural norms. For the purpose of this chapter, the general term “conflict” will be used. *Conflict on teams* is defined here to mean a struggle, or state of disharmony or antagonism, or hostile behaviors, resulting from contradictory interests, needs, or beliefs, or mutually exclusive desires.

The roots of conflict in work teams can be understood and approached from different professional and academic perspectives, e.g., by framing conflict analysis through the varying lenses of the following field fields:

- Organizational behavior sees conflict in work teams coming from negative emotions, fear, and competitiveness arising from perception of differences or scarce resources.
- Intercultural communication sees conflict as coming from misunderstandings due to culturally differing perspectives.
- Conflict resolution sees conflicts as growing from unmet human needs and competing interests.
- Conflict transformation looks holistically at systems of conflict: historical roots and structural causes as well as inter-group dynamics.

Conflicts arise when needs and desires are stifled, or when someone feels threatened. Conflicts on work teams can come from confusion about roles, poorly run meetings, private agendas, and conflicting personalities (Levi 2001). Conflicts may arise in self-directed teams from the ambiguity of non-hierarchical decision-making processes, or if managers feel their authority is threatened by participatory group decisions (Appelbaum et al. 1999). Conflicts may be driven more by “top-down” issues like a scarcity of organizational resources or authoritarian management, or “bottom-up” concerns between individuals who clash for a variety of interpersonal reasons.

### ***Orientation Toward Conflict: Constructive or Destructive***

Conflict can feel dangerous and its potential benefits may not be recognized. Conflicts undermine team goals when disagreements block effective communication and collaboration. Yet conflict is a dynamic force for change. Without the creative tension that is often expressed through conflict, groups may remain stagnant. Without the catalyst of conflict, repressed needs and desires may remain ignored and unmet. Hidden, passively angry, controlled, or indirect conflict may be

as dangerous to a team's survival as open, aggressive, uncontrolled, or direct conflict. Without an inclusive conflict resolution process, affective disenchantment can result in withdrawal from group participation (Amason et al. 1995), or a team will become stuck in conformist groupthink (see Chapter 9).

If conflict is probable, and it is unhealthy to eliminate expression of conflict in a group, how can a team prepare to optimize the way conflicts are managed? Productive struggle, rather than destructive attacks, builds team capacity for understanding differences and finding creative solutions. Awareness of conflict dynamics, cultural differences, and simple communication skills increases the chance of constructively transforming a conflict situation. Multicultural teams in particular require creative and culturally diverse approaches to addressing conflict (Appelbaum et al. 1998). When teams engage with conflicts directly, deepened communication and honest self-examination can lead to creative, positive energy. Negotiating and integrating the varying perspectives and interests of group members are part of what give a team creative dynamism.

### ***Task Versus Relationship Conflicts***

Conflicts on teams can be understood as *task* (resource distribution, procedures, facts, etc.) versus *relationship* or *emotional* (e.g., feelings, preferences, values, style) conflicts. Some organizational behavior theory sees relationship conflicts as rare, but more likely to have negative impact on teams, whereas task conflicts are more common but can be constructive or destructive, depending on how they are managed (Jehn 1997; De Dreu and Weingart 2002). In this view, constructive conflicts operate more at the *cognitive* than *affective* level of team interaction. If conflict can be clearly understood for its components and dynamics, it can move forward as a functional conflict. This should not be misconstrued to mean that emotions should be ignored in a conflict.

A dysfunctional relationship conflict is emotionally hard on people, as opposed to analytically hard on the problem—the opposite of one core precept of *principled negotiation*: to be hard on the problem, not on the people (Fisher and Ury 1983). Well-managed cognitive-style conflict encourages communication of options, innovation, and consensus, rather than dominance by individuals (Appelbaum et al. 1999). Often conflicts on teams are not personal, and many of the conflicts that appear on teams are not significant enough to disrupt the functioning of the team; they may be addressed by remembering the common purpose and general agreement of the team (Kline 1999).

For task conflict to remain constructive, members should stay focused on substantive issues, while respecting and seeking to better understand differences. Communication channels stay open, members are accepted, and diverse member skills and views are used to make decisions and resolve differences of opinion. A destructive conflict gets personalized—negative feelings and private agendas detract from team goals. Frustration increases, while trust, individual input into decisions, and commitment are lost.

Constructive conflict patterns can be encouraged—and destructive conflicts discouraged—by managers through group facilitation (Esquivel and Kleiner 1996). For example, an academic manager in a graduate school held private meetings with faculty members who were generating disagreements on academic committees, but also made public comments praising effective collaboration leading to successful achievements by the committee. On a self-managed team, interpersonal feedback sessions can help clarify which communication and behavior patterns are beneficial and which harmful to the mood and productivity of the team.

What look like task conflicts on the surface, may have hidden relationship components that can sabotage rational, cognitive approaches to conflict resolution. Like the 88% of an iceberg that is hidden under water, buried issues, attitudes, histories, wounds, and emotions can dangerously impact a negotiation if they are not revealed as an explicit dynamic of the conflict. Relationship conflicts require affective as well as cognitive strategies for intervention and healing.

Sometimes asking how someone is feeling about a problem, or offering an apology is worth more than any amount of explanation or problem solving. Sometimes an apology is required for reconciliation to begin. This is also true in international diplomacy, such as when the Chinese demanded a formal apology for an American spy plane entering its airspace in 2001 before they were willing to return the plane to the United States, or when Korea and China demand that Japan apologize for war crimes committed in World War II for the sake of normalizing contemporary international relations.

## Conflict in Stages of Group Development

Conflict in teams is more predictable in certain stages of group development. Two prominent theories name the stages of group development as *forming*, *storming*, *norming*, and *performing* (Tuckman 1965—see Chapter 4), or *inclusion*, *control*, and *openness* (Schutz 1973—see Chapter 4).

During the formation of a group, members are typically optimistic and on their best behavior, so conflicts are rare. During this orientation phase of a team, attention to relationship building can pay off when conflicts eventually emerge. *Trust-building* and *team-building activities* pursued early in a group's existence can create stronger and more open relationships between members. Establishing effective communication channels and habits can prevent conflict, and will facilitate more effective responses to conflict when it does occur. In the MBI (mapping, bridging, integrating) model for bridging differences on cultural teams (Maznevski and DiStefano 2000), building early understanding of and communicating about differences are important for managing those differences and resolving conflicts. Dissonant cultural norms in the early phases of a group can cause dissatisfaction and impede progress to productivity, as this example shows:

*A Liberian woman working on an otherwise American team of women was unfamiliar with their jokes about U.S. television shows. This led her to thinking that*

*Americans are shallow and insensitive, and she refused to participate actively in setting group norms and decision-making processes, becoming argumentative in ways that seemed unreasonable to her teammates. The group required long meetings to finish simple assignments.*

Conflict is most likely to emerge in the middle stages of a group's development. During the *storming* stage, team members experience dissatisfaction as they readjust ideal hopes for their team experience to the realities of the actual group. There is a natural struggle with how much to merge one's individuality with group needs and norms. As members have already developed a sense of *inclusion* in the team, they feel enough ownership for the team to begin struggling for *control* over team direction and decisions. If feelings and conflicts are not effectively addressed, the team may remain stuck in a stage of dissatisfaction, with either overt or covert struggle for control. At this stage, effective and well-timed communication is critical in ensuring that a conflict does not escalate out of control. If conflicts are addressed effectively and their underlying causes are adequately resolved, teams will move to the next stage, where increased cohesion and agreement about group norms lead to feelings and expressions of *openness* and high *performing* productivity.

## Personal Styles of Addressing Conflict

Individual styles of addressing conflict are based on differences in personality (see Chapter 3), the influences of family, and cultural norms. Individuals from any culture may be ready or reticent to take initiative and confront a conflict directly. Still, without stereotyping cultures, we can be aware that different communities and nationalities have evolved differing acceptable norms for engaging in healthy conflict. When a conflict arises, some cultures exhibit more direct and overt argument, while others favor more indirect communication, even via a third party. There are cultural realities that allow us to more easily imagine people from Mediterranean cultures in a public argument than people from East Asian countries, whether over a minor or major issue. The fact that we don't see an argument on the street in Japan or Thailand does not mean there is no conflict, and, similarly, if we witness an energetic argument among Italians or Israelis, it doesn't mean that a serious conflict exists. Influenced by television and radio talk shows, the United States has developed into an increasingly argumentative culture (Tannen 1998). Traditional cultures may involve an extended family or social network in reaching out to address a conflict—for example, when parents, grandparents, and in-laws offer advice to a struggling young couple in Cyprus or Nigeria.

In multicultural work teams influenced by the presence of diverse cultural perceptions, practices, and personalities, differing styles of dealing with conflict will impact group dynamics. A widely used system for categorizing conflict styles is Thomas' (1976) matrix of *avoiding*, *accommodating*, *competing*, *compromising*, or *collaborating*—drawn from an individual's relative behavioral predisposition in a conflict situation, measured along the contrasting dimensions of assertiveness or

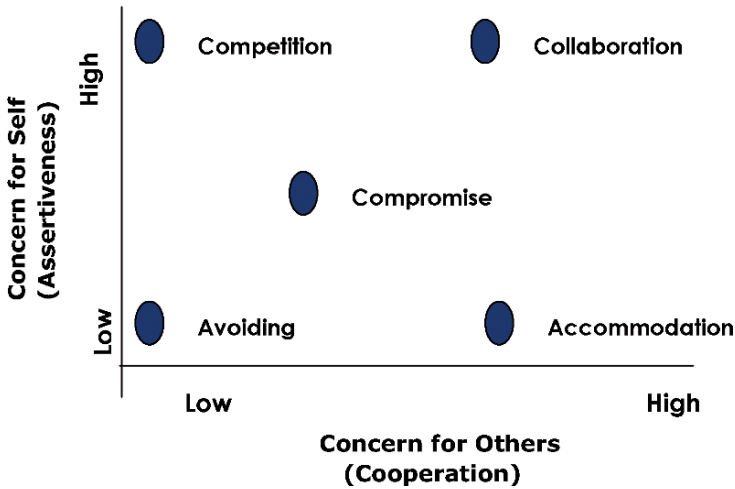


Fig. 8.1 Conflict management styles (Thomas 1976)

cooperativeness. These five styles of addressing conflict can be thought of in terms of needs (see Fig. 8.1). There are pros and cons to each conflict style.

If I am only concerned with my own needs (vertical axis on the chart), I will be likely to *compete* or coerce. *Competition* may resolve a conflict quickly, but may sacrifice friendships. When I am only concerned with seeing that another's needs are met (horizontal axis on the chart) in order to preserve a relationship, I completely *accommodate* the other. If this is not an important issue, this can be satisfactory, but if it is important or happens repeatedly, I can build up resentment. *Accommodation* may preserve friendships on the surface, but lead to brewing resentments. If I *avoid* a conflict, I don't take care of my needs or anyone else's. I can use sarcastic comments or subtly hostile behaviors such as ignoring someone, or simply remove myself from the conflict. *Avoidance* may be wise for averting danger in the short run, but cannot resolve the problem. With a clever *compromise*, I can partially meet of my needs as well as the needs of others. *Compromise* may meet some needs of each party, but not all. If we *collaborate* as equal partners in trying to communicate effectively, we take on the challenge of trying to meet everyone's needs. I take responsibility for my needs and feelings, giving clear feedback about what I feel in response to another's actions (see Chapter 7), and I listen to understand the actions of others. *Collaboration* may devise a wise solution, but may require a lot of time and effort to achieve.

Individuals approach different conflict situations with varying styles. For example, in a more formal conflict at work I may be more coercive, while I may be more accommodating with friends. It can be useful for individuals to assess their own preferences and styles in addressing conflict to see what pros and cons arise when applying their particular style:

Rahim (1983) developed a parallel system for conflict resolution style preference based on relative concern for self or others creating a similar system based on combinations of high or low concern: The various styles in this system are named:

*avoiding, obliging, dominating, compromising, or integrating.* Differing styles of addressing conflict may reduce or increase stress levels: Integrating has been shown to reduce stress by lowering task and relationship conflict; avoiding and dominating styles can increase stress by raising task and relationship conflict; obliging can reduce the experience of conflict-induced stress, but also increase stress due to the inability to assert one's interests (Friedman et al. 2000).

Avoiding means withdrawing and not engaging with an uncomfortable situation; accommodating/obliging leads to focus on similarities rather than differences and giving away one's own interests in pursuit of maintaining a harmonious relationship; competing/dominating means seeking to win and control the outcome of a dispute even if it means forcing one's will and interests on others; compromising involves giving up something of one's own interests in order to achieve a mutually acceptable, if imperfect, solution to a conflict; collaborating/integrating implies open sharing of information about opposing vs. shared interests in order to reach truly satisfactory, and possibly creative, solution for all parties.

### ***Exercise: Analyzing Your Style of Dealing with Conflict***

*It is possible to assess one's own conflict-handling style via self-reflection, getting feedback from friends or colleagues, or more formally by using the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument, available on the Internet.*

*Self-reflective questions include:*

*What works and what is difficult for me in resolving interpersonal conflicts? How does my culture or background influence the way I deal with conflict? How does my cultural style help or hinder me in dealing with conflict? Are there exclusive symbols and rituals of in-group identity that bring pride or fear while predisposing me to hostility towards those outside my group? (Morrow and Wilson 1996) Where have these habits come from? How does my cultural socialization dispose me to act in future conflicts?*

Much of this behavioral diversity in conflict is due to personality (see Chapter 3), but personality is not deterministic. The theory of *psychosynthesis* (Assagioli 1971) proposes that we can overidentify with parts of the self, or *sub-personalities*, blinding us to the freedom we have to incorporate a wide range of possible behaviors in response to dynamic social situations. Understanding how our own psychological patterns function can help us act more objectively in conflict situations. Other aspects of behavioral variation in conflict are due to culture.

## **Cultural Styles of Dealing with Conflict**

Culture can be viewed as a unique combination of values, behavioral norms, and symbols, or alternately, perceptions, practices, and products (Moran 2001). Myriad factors make members of two distinct cultures either compatible or likely to clash on a work team. To prevent conflict, cultural differences in approaching problems,

communicating, gender roles, or time management may need to be explicitly acknowledged and group norms altered in order to meet the needs of group members with different national, ethnic, religious, gender, or cultural identities. Differing perceptions and assumptions shape how individuals approach a given conflict. In a multicultural team or an intercultural conflict, perceptions of a conflict situation may be dramatically different when seen through the lens of diverging *cultural frameworks* (see Chapter 2). This point is illustrated in the following example.

*Professor Stephen Worchel describes a time he planted bananas in his yard in Hawaii and they spread into his neighbors' yards. In the multicultural milieu of Hawaiian society, his neighbors were Japanese, Portuguese, Chinese, and Hawaiian. Each of them responded differently: the Japanese neighbor was affronted by this encroachment as an example of American insensitivity and arrogance; the Portuguese neighbor became competitive and tried to grow larger bananas; the Chinese neighbor chopped down the banana plants that had entered his own yard late at night without even discussing the issue; and the Hawaiian neighbor laughed off the issue and blamed the land itself for the problem (Worchel 2005). Even though there were individualistic, and perhaps even culturally atypical in the Japanese case, approaches to this minor agriculture dispute among his various neighbors, it brought into clear view the ways cultural diversity can impact responses to conflict.*

To act differently from one's own cultural norms can feel uncomfortable to the point of feeling that one's sense of identity is threatened. In more collectivist societies, open conflict has traditionally been seen as dangerous to social cohesion (Triandis 1995). Still, recent organizational behavior research shows that openly addressing conflict, even in collectivist societies, can be constructive, improving problem-solving and developing (rather than threatening) interdependence. Paradoxically, avoiding open conflict may lead to more competitive interaction and less interdependence (Tjosvold et al. 2003).

Individuals with *high- or low-context* cultural styles may need to be approached differently in a conflict situation (Ting-Toomey 2003). For example, a lower context individual should consider being less direct and urgent in trying to resolve a conflict than they are accustomed to being when approaching a higher context individual; when dealing with a conflict involving a lower context person, a higher context individual may have better success by trying to be more direct and forthcoming than would feel appropriate within his or her home culture.

## **Conflict Through the Lens of Culture**

Imagine a circle of people standing around a complex sculpture. Without moving, each person can only see a particular view of this sculpture. They may miss key portions of the structure that are hidden on the sides of the sculpture that are out of their line of view. This is similar to individuals with differing needs or from different



cultures trying to understand a common conflict. Subjective perspectives are influenced by personal or political histories and norms of cultural understanding. Diverse cultural norms within one group create complex interactions—as in a mandala, sculpture, or puzzle—that influence emotional expression, power, and persuasion within intragroup conflicts. Not only understanding but also legitimating another's perspective on a conflict creates connections across difference. This allows the team members to speak more freely, and to build collective understanding of how each has contributed to the conflict in question (Kolb and Williams 2003).

Differing cultural norms lead to divergent perspectives: relative cultural frames, such as varied approaches to power distance relationships between managers and employees, individualism versus collectivism, temporality and the management of time, and even the dynamics of interpersonal space or habits of eye contact (see Chapter 2), should be considered when beginning to address a conflict with someone from another cultural background. For example individuals from a society where there is high power distance or strong collective loyalties, may find it difficult as subordinates to directly address a conflict with a superior. High uncertainty avoidance tendencies in members on a self-directed team may cause unacceptable levels of tension and reactive conflict (Hofstede 1980). This status-based obstacle to early resolution of a problem could lead to escalation of the conflict and even to open rebellion. Regarding time and personal space issues, simple discomfort with divergent norms can bring conflict-producing tensions. Team members at different points on a continuum of universalist versus particularist values may disagree more severely than seems warranted over a discrepancy in following a rule or procedures. The following example highlights this point.

*A young female Scandinavian diplomat working in West Africa confronted the mayor over the telephone about a development spending issue. He hung up on her: she was overstepping her bounds as a young woman, whom he saw as having too much power coming with her control over development funds. She wanted to talk with him the next time they met to tell him that hanging up on her was not acceptable and that he could tell her directly if he was angry with her. Before she could do this, her ambassador recounted the incident to the mayor's older cousin, who approached the mayor. In West Africa, when an older cousin points out a blunder, admonishing the mayor's behavior in this case, the younger cousin must apologize. The next time the diplomat saw the mayor, he apologized and even gave her champagne for her birthday. Since he had admitted that he was wrong, she could no longer directly address his behavior and talk through their differences. Rather, she was conciliatory in order to help him save face: she acknowledged that he probably hadn't really meant what he did. The roots or dynamics of the conflict were never truly resolved or transformed, though the conflict was defused, albeit in a manner that was not satisfying to the diplomat.*

Differing linguistic norms and discursive styles can also lead to misunderstandings between team members. Intercultural communication theory reminds us that what is said may not be what is heard, particularly where there are cultural filters

at work between the speaker and the listener (Fantini 1991). The actual meaning of specific words, even the word “peace” itself, may have different definitions to people on two ends of a verbal exchange (Cohen 1998). William Safire (2005), in his *New York Times* column “On Language”, has noted that there is no term for compromise in Arabic, though *taarradhin*, a conflict resolved without humiliation, comes closest to a Western notion of a win-win solution.

*New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman (2005) recounts this story about intercultural linguistic misunderstanding:

Last September, Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick gave a speech to the National Committee on United States-China relations in which he repeatedly urged China to become a responsible “stakeholder” in the international system. It turns out there is no word in Chinese for “stakeholder,” and the initial Chinese reaction was puzzlement and reaching for a dictionary. Did Zoellick mean “steak holder”? After all, he was speaking at a dinner. Maybe this was some Texas slang for telling China it had to buy more U.S. beef? Well, eventually the Chinese got a correct interpretation (p. 12).

A comparable anecdote is of the Ghanaian bureaucrat who was invited to a “brown bag” lunch in Copenhagen. The intention for such a meeting is that everyone brings their own lunch, whether in a brown bag or not, but in Ghana “brown bag” signifies a bribe! The confusion and cross-cultural misunderstanding of the Ghanaian about the nature of this meeting was somewhat comic in this case, and easily cleared up, but it could have created more serious ethical judgments with longer-term implications for international collaboration. Common-sense human social behaviors, such as *self-restraint*, *humor*, or *separation*, are effectively employed in traditional as well as modern societies to diffuse tensions and de-escalate conflict (Bonta 1996).

Conflict can grow from misinterpreted nonverbal cues or tone of voice. In a multicultural context, the chances for miscommunications increase. A simple misunderstanding can lead to an incorrect interpretation of intention, which can initiate the Ladder of Inference (see Chapter 7) and set into motion a retaliatory cycle. A wrong assumption can draw an unexpectedly hostile reaction, leading to hidden animosity or open argument, setting off a cycle of reactive negative exchanges. Kelman describes how conflicts escalate—not only from reciprocal misunderstandings, but from perceived threats, pride, defensiveness, and inflexibility—into an *interactive self-escalatory process* (Kelman 1998). The following is an example of miscommunication escalating to conflict.

*A Sudanese man and an American woman were working together on an academic team. The American woman had a habit of making mildly sarcastic comments and on one occasion jokingly suggested that the group did not want to hear from the Sudanese man, intending actually to mean the opposite by teasingly encouraging him to speak. He took this very personally and publicly said he felt this was a disrespectful racist comment and refused to speak to her again. She tried to speak with him in private and apologized profusely, but he refused to talk with her or accept her apology. At a later point, and after other members of the team had tried to engage him to speak with the woman, he decided that it was no longer an issue and said so publicly. The incident was never directly*

*discussed, and the woman felt the issue was never actually resolved; she never felt safe enough to speak openly with her colleague again.*

Such issues of direct versus indirect communication in team members operating from *specific* versus *diverse* cultural frames must be managed in a manner that allows colleagues to retain their dignity during the management of a conflict. Even on virtual teams, misunderstandings require responses with adequate interpersonal and intercultural sensitivity to keep them from escalating into damaging conflict. On virtual teams there are novel linguistic opportunities for miscommunication, since only written words are shared without any socially moderating nonverbal cues, such as tone of voice or a smile. The following is an example of virtual team miscommunication.

*A Danish development aid administrator sent an e-mail about decision on a project issue to all relevant parties. One member of the team from Ivory Coast sent an aggressive response—cc'ed to everyone on the e-mail list and others not directly involved in the issue—that she had not received any e-mail message leading up to this decision. In fact, she had been away from the office for some time and had not received the earlier e-mail communication that went out. This public and aggressive style of dealing with conflict was one that had been faced before by this administrator in Ivory Coast. She sensed that her Ivorian colleagues want to make sure they are heard and that other people know about a conflict. Rather than being confrontational in response and sending a public e-mail message that pointed out the team member's mistake to everyone, the administrator won respect by sending her only a private e-mail response with a copy of the earlier communication. The team member appreciated that her mistake had been underplayed and not made public, and this greatly improved the relationship between the administrator and the team member in the long run.*

Improving *interpretability* (i.e., speech that facilitates understanding) and checking that intended meanings are clearly understood, are key to keeping conflict constructive (Ayoko et al. 2001). Recent research suggests that the existence of social *advice networks*, and team leaders who are capable of initiating structure for their team, moderate the impact of values diversity as a cause of team conflict (Klein et al. 2004). What awareness of my own identity, my patterns of behavior, and my ways of perceiving or communicating might be needed to prevent as well as resolve conflicts? Transparency about differing styles is a simple step toward coordinating and harmonizing group norms for addressing conflict. Cultural styles of conflict and strengths in conflict resolution can be elicited via storytelling—telling stories within a multicultural group that shed light on ways that we have dealt with conflict in the past.

### ***Exercise: Group Storytelling to Analyze Conflict Styles***

*Have the members of a group or class sit in a circle. Each person tells one sentence of a story that the group creates. For example, the first person says "Once upon a time there was a conflict..." The next person continues and then*

*the next person until everyone in a circle has spoken and the group has developed a story about a conflict and how it was addressed in their particular cultural style, specifically mentioning who are the parties and stakeholders that get involved in the conflict dynamics and develop strategies for resolution.*

I have used this activity with groups in conflict from various countries who share similar cultural styles of dealing with conflict. This activity helps them understand their cultural commonalities in ways that allow them to proceed to mutually address a specific conflict in the group or between their ethnic or national communities.

## Identity Issues

In a multicultural team, functioning in ways that are culturally unfamiliar can feel threatening to one's identity. Unrecognized identity needs can simmer into open conflicts.

Identity-based conflicts are more complex and deeply personal than disputes over tangible issues such as resources (Rothman 1997; Maalouf 2002). Social identity differences need not disappear in order to eliminate conflict; rather, successful conflict management strategies work with those identities and capitalize on recognition of real diversity (Haslam 2001). Catholic and Protestant teenagers from Northern Ireland who participated in peace-building dialogue reported that they felt a stronger sense of their own identity even as they came to appreciate differences and similarities in relation to members of the other community (Ungerleider 2003).

Fundamental psychoanalytic theory defines a variety of psychological defense mechanisms that work to protect the safety of the ego when it feels threatened (Freud 1946). One of these defense mechanisms is *projection*, in which I project my own faults onto others in order to see myself in a better light and preserve my self-esteem. Though these thoughts may begin unconsciously, they can lead to blaming; sometimes one member is isolated and made into a *scapegoat* for problems in the group.

Scapegoating is often employed to reinforce membership within a community. Positive conceptions of belonging to an in-group are contrasted to negative stereotypes and enemy images of an out-group (Ashmore et al. 2002). Reinforcement by the in-group will protect members from seeing their behavior as intolerant. Ethnic or national groups maintain traditional scapegoats. When members of a multicultural or multi-ethnic work team come from identity groups with a history of identity-based conflict—such as Greeks and Turks or Japanese and Koreans—even mild criticisms or pointed jokes could escalate tensions. If there is a power imbalance in an inter-group relationship, an actual or perceived *one up/one down* relationship (see Chapter 3) may develop. A team leader will want to address this potentially divisive dynamic in a proactive manner by building trust and communication capacity.

Gender socialization cannot be ignored as an identity factor that impacts team communication and conflict dynamics. Gender stereotypes can lead to false

assumptions, or even bias against team members. Different styles and goals of communication have been identified for men and women—for example, men tend to communicate in order to seek status while women talk to achieve intimacy (Tannen 1991; Wood 2000). In keeping with socialized norms concerning gender roles, men may act more overtly aggressive in a conflict, while women tend to withdraw.

The pressure to conform to dominant social norms and mores can lead to fear that I will be rejected if I'm not "normal." This internalized fear of my own difference, translated to guilt, shame, or anxiety, is projected onto others who diverge from group norms. This projection of socially unacceptable qualities translates into *enemy images*, then to fears of victimization and reactive attacks (Keen 1986). In interpersonal conflicts, just as in intergroup conflict, this dynamic can emerge as *mirror images* between two enemies—the innocent self (victim) versus the aggressive other (perpetrator) (Kelman 1998). This is easier to see in intergroup relations. Tensions between Muslim immigrants and European natives have erupted into riots, as in Oldham, England in 2003, and Paris, France in 2005 each group saw the other as both culturally different and threatening to its security.

The issue of security is central to both personal and political conflict behaviors. Where there is perceived insecurity, either personally or politically, irrational reactions and defensive attitudes escalate potential differences into aggressive behaviors in a pattern of *self-fulfilling prophecy*: "a false definition of the situation evoking a new behavior which makes the originally false conception come true" (Merton 1957, p. 423). Arguably, Israelis and Palestinians, by seeing each other as a threat, have implemented aggressive and violent practices towards each other, which have in turn proved the reality of each their respective fears. Rather than seeking to build security through power and force—or *collective security* (i.e., ganging up with allies to intimidate potential opponents)—conflict transformation principles suggest seeking to build *cooperative security* (Forsberg 1992), where people work together to eliminate injustice and create healthy social systems that prevent conflict.

### ***Preventing Escalation***

For preventing violence and healing historic wounds, Staub (1989) emphasizes shifting a culture of antagonism to one of positive reciprocity. Developing pro-social attitudes and behaviors, such as showing interest in others, sharing openly about one's own perspective, and appropriately timing remarks, are helpful in laying the groundwork for trust and team harmony. Relationship-building leads to mutual confidence.

Within a multicultural team the emergence of some kind of unifying *transcendent identity* (Kelman 2002) among team members can override the divisive potential of identity-based differences. Consolidating mutual linguistic and behavioral customs within a group reduces potential misunderstanding and build common team identity. A team leader can build trust and common identity through team-building activities, establishing *super-ordinate goals* (common objectives), and keeping communication honest and open.

## Approaches to Conflict Resolution

The growing field of *conflict resolution* offers a toolbox of perspectives and interventions relevant to a wide variety of conflict situations, ranging from *negotiation* strategies and third-party *mediation* to using systematic *conflict transformation* interventions and *peacebuilding* to shift relationships sustaining intractable, deep-rooted conflicts.

Logical analysis based on sound theory, plus intuitive insight, sensitivity, and awareness of conflict dynamics, are all needed to devise interventions that will de-escalate a growing conflict. Ideally, the timing, contextual framing, and level of directness of an intervention will be sensitive to the needs and identities of the parties in conflict. A third-party consultant or mediator may be required if internal efforts to intervene are ineffective.

### *Negotiation*

Conflict resolution theory and practice focuses on developing appropriate approaches for negotiating a conflict. Similar to cultural styles of dealing with conflict, *negotiating styles* are described as being (1) *soft*: concerned with preserving the relationship between the negotiating parties; or (2) *hard*: focused on winning the negotiation. In their landmark book about negotiation, *Getting to Yes*, Fisher and Ury (1983) developed the notion of *principled negotiation*, in which negotiators focus on alternative approaches that are neither soft nor hard: trying to understand mutual needs and seek joint solutions; working together to uncover underlying (and potentially common) interests, rather than digging into competing positions; proceeding independent of whether or not trust has been established; and being hard on the problem rather than the people in negotiation. In cooperative, interest-based *integrative bargaining* (Pruitt 1981), parties collaborate to find *win-win agreements* that meet the needs of both parties. In game theory, a win-lose result is called *zero sum*: that is, where a win equals +1 and a loss equals -1, the sum of the equation is zero:  $+1 - 1 = 0$ . A win-win solution could result in a positive sum:  $1 + 1 = 2$ .

Allowing for informal *pre-negotiation* (Cohen 1991) or *circum-negotiation* sessions (Saunders 1999), meetings to build trust and communication norms before a negotiation session, can establish effective and potentially face-saving ground rules to insure a more successful formal process. Participants might agree to the setting and procedures to be used for the formal negotiation, what are possible areas for potential agreement, and whether there are some topics that just shouldn't be raised. To build confidence and momentum in a negotiation it may be necessary to address less controversial issues first. What is important is to clarify mutual understanding of the essential conflict, and verify the main issues and interests for each party.

Cultural styles impact negotiations by adding *cross-cultural “noise”*—i.e., the verbal and nonverbal messages that cannot be clearly understood across cultures, and lead to linguistic or symbolic misinterpretation (Fisher 1980; Cohen 1991; Avruch 1998). Assumptions about national negotiating characteristics, even if once useful, have become diluted by rapid international globalization. Like in the cartoon in which an Englishman bows while a Japanese businessman reaches out for a handshake, international negotiators are fast learning to adapt to the complexities and uncertainties of intercultural negotiation. Principles for intercultural negotiations that apply to communication in multicultural teams include:

1. Be flexible, get to know the other culture, employ approaches that will facilitate communication, avoid what may be irritating.
2. Be careful not to get stuck in stereotypical assessments and assignment of traits.
3. Be aware of language barriers, check understanding from time to time, go slow, ask questions.
4. Be careful about attributing meaning to nonverbal behavior; nonverbal communication is significant and may even contradict verbal input.
5. Be aware that mistrust can breakdown communication and communication is essential (Casse 1985).

## ***Mediation***

In the professional field of *mediation*, or *alternative dispute resolution (ADR)*, a neutral third party facilitates an agreement between parties in conflict. Mediators also look beyond the ultimate goal of a reaching agreement to consider the importance of relationships and cultural differences in the mediation process. An emerging focus on *transformative or humanistic mediation* brings awareness to the importance of transforming and developing relationships between parties in conflict. Transformative mediators believe that building relationship can be even more important than penning a formal agreement, which may end a dispute in the short term but not resolve the underlying causes of the conflict (Baruch Bush and Folger 1994).

In a multicultural team, there may be a need for a neutral third-party to mediate a dispute between team members with culturally diverging norms for dealing with conflict. An interculturally sensitive mediator will *interpret, buffer, and coordinate* dissonant linguistic or nonverbal messages and negotiating styles to protect the *face* (self-respect and honor) of adversaries and keep communication flowing (Cohen 1998). A mediator working across cultures should elicit relevant cultural behaviors, norms, and wisdom that can be useful in transforming a conflict (Lederach 1995). In traditional societies, a social leader or elder will be engaged as a mediator. An example is Burma, where *respected insiders* are called on as a neutral third party who will use informal methods for mediating a serious conflict (Leone and Giannini 2005).

## *Conflict Transformation and Peacebuilding*

*Conflict transformation* stresses the need to deal not only with the *problem*, but also with the *people* involved, the *process* of addressing the problem, and the sources or *politics* underlying the presenting problem. Conflict transformation recognizes that systems of conflict, and the wounded relationships that sustain them, must be deeply transformed if there is to be sustainable peace (Diamond and McDonald 1996; Green 2002; Lederach 2003). Conflict transformation moves from situational analysis to strategic intervention, assessing the sources and dynamics of a conflict, then trying to transform the structures and relationships that sustain a conflict system, working at both personal and political levels.

Conflict transformation seeks to build “positive” as well as “negative” peace (Galtung 1969), where there is not only an absence of overt violence (the calm of an oppressive Pax Romana), but healthy social systems and relationships between people. Conflict transformation seeks to promote nonviolent approaches to conflict, to transform conflictual relationships, and to build peace culture. Successful conflict transformation practice requires creative problem solving, lateral thinking, coping with complexity, addressing multiple tasks, and dealing with confusing emotions in challenging situations. Systematic conflict analysis and strategic intervention must incorporate diverse cultural values and even opposing views of reality.

The goals of conflict transformation, which are oriented toward intercommunal and international violence, are also relevant to intragroup conflict. Just as in conflict transformation, dialogues or *problem-solving workshops* between representatives of groups in conflict, *mutual reassurance* and *confidence building* must be developed to reopen the bridges of effective communication between conflicting parties (Kelman 1998). Within multicultural teams, just as in multiethnic societies, there must be informal and formal mechanisms established for minority representation and consultation, power sharing, and participation, along with tangible as well as perceived recognition (Boulding 1992).

During his tenure as UN Secretary General, Boutros Boutros Ghali defined the roles of peacekeeping, peacemaking, and peacebuilding in *An Agenda for Peace* (1983). Roles outlined for international peace missions apply to building peace on work teams as well: *Peacekeepers* (to police behaviors or intercede and keep feuding members apart), *peacemakers* (negotiators or mediators), or *peacebuilders* (team and trust builders, systems reformers) may need to emerge in order to heal the dynamics in a team. Conceiving of myself as a potential peacemaker or peacebuilder can change my ability to respond to conflict. Peacebuilders need to look deeply to see what may be hidden under the surface of a contentious negotiation or conflict. *What might I do as a peacemaker or peacebuilder when a conflict begins to escalate?*

As peacebuilders, we can imagine what well-placed interventions will have a ripple effect throughout our societies, organizations, or teams. The challenge is to create a harmonious, team culture that values diverse styles and contributions, rather than a culture of conformity, or conflict, or even emotional violence—a culture



of peace. It is useful to imagine a yogurt or sourdough starter, a small but potent seed that changes the quality of all that is around it. A spoonful of yogurt turns gallons of milk into yogurt. In many ancient languages around the Mediterranean there is the expression, “slowly slowly” (*sigá sigá*—Greek; *yavash yavash*—Turkish; *leyat leyat*—Hebrew; *shway, shway*—Arabic). This expression can be seen as an approach to life, as well as a sensible approach to transforming seemingly intractable conflicts.

Traditional and tribal societies have developed their own conflict resolution mechanisms for *reconciliation* and *restorative justice*. For example, the Polynesian *Ho’o ponopono* approach to reconciliation is a holistic system that incorporates restitution to victims and forgiveness of perpetrators (Galtung 2001). The *Gada’a* system of training young men about their social responsibilities among the Omara in Ethiopia includes mechanisms for conflict resolution (Solomon 2005). Rwanda brought back its traditional *gacaca* tribunal system to deal with a huge backlog of cases and overcrowded prisons after the 1994 genocide (Lambourne 2001). The peaceful, aboriginal Semai people in Malaysia use the *becharaa’* process of informal discussions and formal speeches to exhaustively assess communal consensus for a just solution based on Semai traditional values—values which, as in other peaceful traditional societies, emphasize *peacefulness* through a world view emphasizing nonviolence as a fundamental component of humanity (Bonta 1996).

## **Collaborative Conflict Transformation on Teams: Communication Skills for Dialogue**

While there are a growing number of theories and methods of conflict resolution coming from professionals in the field, there are still few experts better than each of us in understanding our own unique cultural and personal context in relation to the kind of conflicts we experience in our daily life and in our socio-political environment. Any work team can collaboratively analyze its specific multicultural dynamics and can deepen cross-cultural dialogue to develop more effective responses to conflict.

In order for conflict dynamics to shift, group processes, communication styles, and relationships may need to be addressed through an honest dialogue in which perceptions are openly shared and actively heard. With diverse communication, negotiating, and conflict styles, with differing cultures, perspectives, identities, and needs, how can a multicultural team have an effective dialogue? Will team discussion about conflict have the dynamics of (1) a positional debate, (2) a problem-solving task force, or (3) a dialogue designed to create understanding of differences, relationships, and trust?

When team members are empowered to express themselves honestly and are recognized for their perceptions and feelings, a deeper level of dialogue and communication is possible. In order to have honest dialogue with the goal of

building understanding of diverse perspectives, norms for dialogue must be agreed upon to establish an atmosphere of respect and open communication. For example, explicit agreements not to interrupt or to use words that are recognized as divisive can prevent predictable conflicts from arising. Fundamental skills of speaking and listening must be sharpened and deepened for effective conflict dialogue. *Authentic expression* (Kelman 1998) combined with *active listening* ideally leads to a sense of *deep dialogue* (Diamond 1996).

### ***Authentic Expression***

Authentic expression means openly and honestly sharing my perspective about a situation. One technique for speaking authentically is taking ownership for my opinions, or speaking from “I” statements, rather than using the general, dominant, and impersonal “we.” Directly expressing my feelings is an approach for giving honest interpersonal feedback (See Chapter 7). This is particularly important in a conflict situation. In a multicultural setting, directly expressing my point of view on a controversial topic may stretch the limits of what is culturally appropriate, particularly in a mixed-gender setting. When cultural complexity makes the appropriate level of honest expression confusing, it seems to be a fairly universal human phenomenon that *conciliatory language* will achieve more harmonious results than hostile words.

### ***Active Listening***

Active listening consists of such techniques as providing supportive nonverbal cues, asking clarifying questions, and summarizing or offering reflective statements to show understanding (see Chapter 7). The goal of active listening is confirming what has been heard, and that hearing has actually taken place, establishing a foundation for genuine communication. Often we don’t communicate, we compete. We don’t really listen but rather prepare our next rebuttal point for debate. Really listening shows respect and openness, that I will sincerely consider the views and needs of others. Listening can actively defuse aggressiveness by:

- Exhibiting receptivity to new ideas and openness to statements that I may not agree with
- Giving value to the speaker
- Displaying a willingness to hear—neutrality and a lack of hostility (Turk 1997)

In trying to understand the dynamics of a conflict, it is important to listen to the context as well as content of what is being said, including the observation of nonverbal and symbolic messages. When working interculturally, it may be more

complicated to assess what is effective active listening and what makes someone feel heard. For example, a common nonverbal feature of active listening is keeping eye contact. This may be inappropriate, particularly between genders, in specific cultures.

Through practicing *authentic expression* and *active listening*, team members will feel a sense of *recognition* and *empowerment*—(1) recognition of who I am and the value of what I have to contribute, and (2) empowerment to honestly express my perspectives, needs, and feelings.

It is important to ascertain effective verbal and nonverbal cues within a specific culture in order to be accurately understood and to ensure that others feel heard. As a member of any group, we can experimentally determine whether speaking authentically and actively listening has improved communication.

### ***Check-in/Check-out***

A common technique in dialogue about conflict is to use a *check-in* at the beginning of a group or a *check-out* at the end. In both of these activities, group members each take a turn sharing something about how they are doing or feeling about events. In a check-in activity, each team member may say how they are, or share a recent event or something personally significant that has happened since the group last met. During a check-out activity, participants each express how they personally felt about the group meeting. A check-out is an explicit opportunity to find out whether a session felt productive, whether communication was effective, and whether group members felt that their perspectives and positions were heard and considered by those with conflicting perspectives or positions.

In a check-out, we can ask ourselves and let the team know: Did I feel heard? We can find out from other team members: Did you feel heard? It is important to recognize how we feel when we are heard (valued) versus when we are ignored (worthless). The resentment and anger that can be planted by group members who are not feeling listened to—even about unrelated issues—can translate quickly into open conflict. Unresolved feelings and resentments can be a source of disgruntlement and resistance to group productivity, which can devolve unexpectedly into conflict.

### ***Nonverbal Communication Activities***

While dialogue is an important tool for conflict transformation, there may be times when talking is ineffective or inappropriate in multicultural teams. Common words may not exist that can adequately communicate emotions or cultural conventions. At those times, nonverbal aesthetic or artistic alternatives—even silence—may provide a more appropriate format for dealing with emotional

conflict (Van Gligow et al. 2004). Formal or informal inclusive rituals that welcome members of all traditions can also be practically employed for peace-building (Schirch 2004).

### ***Communicating Using Exercise: T'ai Ch'i Chuan***

*Employing activities that increase sensitivity and awareness of interpersonal dynamics can facilitate the ability to perceive escalation of conflict versus enhanced communication. An example is a push hands exercise from the Chinese exercise practice in the martial arts tradition T'ai Ch'i Chuan. Two partners stand facing each other with legs in a balanced position (feet shoulder width, one foot in front of the other) and gently touch the backs of their wrists together. Partners experiment with pushing each other's wrist, slowly moving together in a circular motion, experimenting with varieties of force and sensitivity, trying to stick together and yield enough to each other's force to keep active communication open. It is quickly apparent how your partner reacts when you are overly aggressive, or how the relationship is lost when you are too passive. Employing force against force leads to stalemate and impasse. By contrast, give and take leads to flexibility, working together, and fine-tuning the dynamics of interpersonal communication into a sense of blending and harmony (Crum 1987). The give and take of negotiation can be experienced tangibly in such a game; the sensation of interacting rather than fighting may be then translated via metaphor to verbal communication or conflict situations. Physical 'listening' characteristics, such as following and attending, can be translated to more general relational skills such as paying attention or caring. Both empowerment and recognition are heightened as the rhythm of communication develops.*

### ***Deepening Dialogue: Building Empathy and Reconciliation***

*Interactive conflict resolution approaches using dialogue are beneficial in promoting empathy (Fisher 1997) and reconciliation when there are conflicts on multicultural teams. Joint narrative storytelling about a conflict's impact on individuals promotes compassion and healing (Hadjipavlou-Trigeorgis 1998). Using reflexive dialogue (Rothman 1997), group members build a sense of a shared responsibility through introspective interaction in which participants speak about their needs and interests, rather than blaming and arguing, or even problem-solving; this creates a forum for mutual empowerment and recognition.*

A relevant concept from the field of international diplomacy is *GRIT* (*gradual reduction in tension*), in which each party makes graduated and reciprocated initiatives to reduce tension and build confidence and trust (Osgood 1962). At youth

peace-building camps, dialogue proceeds from the relatively low-risk sharing of similarities and differences, through higher risk discussions of stereotypes and differing perspectives on history, to more deeply personal sharing of family stories (Ungerleider 2001). To achieve *forgiveness* between parties that have wounded each other can be one of the deepest goals, yet the act of forgiveness itself has a power to transform and heal a conflict that should not be underestimated (Henderson 1999).

## Relevant Competencies

- Capacity to analyze the causes of conflict
- Ability to recognize the creative potential of conflict and engage with conflict constructively
- Ability to respond sensitively and appropriately to diverse cultural styles of addressing conflict
- Awareness of one's own predominant conflict style and the flexibility to use different styles as appropriate
- Skills for working through conflict in normative stages of group development
- Ability to distinguish between task and relationship conflict and respond appropriately
- Willingness and ability to apply conflict interventions: negotiation, mediation, conflict transformation, and peacebuilding
- Willingness to collaborate to transform conflict dynamics on teams
- Communication skills for open dialogue

## Summary

In summary, members of multicultural work teams need to develop an orientation toward conflict to bring out its constructive potential and avoid its destructive ramifications. Team members will have diverse personal and cultural styles of engaging in and seeking to resolve conflict. Conflict is more likely to appear in the middle stages of group development, when members are adjusting their expectations to the reality of a group's dynamics and wrestling for their share of control. Team members would be wise to develop coherent communication norms and trusting relationships that will serve them when conflicts do arise. The social-psychological dynamics of identity play a critical hidden role in interpersonal and intercultural relationships in teams, just as they do in intergroup or international relations. Work teams facing more serious conflicts may choose to integrate various approaches for conflict resolution, from negotiation to third party mediation, to more systematic conflict transformation and peacebuilding. Multicultural work teams can work collaboratively to become aware of and transform the dynamics of intragroup conflict by applying communication skills for dialogue that will surface the issues in a conflict and transform the relationships and structures that sustain conflict.

## Case Studies

*As you read the case studies below, consider the following questions:*

- *What tools from this chapter can be used to assess the conflict dynamics at work in this multicultural team?*
- *What are the characteristics, tendencies, differences and potential conflicts between members of different gender, age, and professional experience level?*
- *What are the styles of dealing with conflict for each group member? What parts of these styles are personal versus culturally influenced?*
- *How can the underlying interests and needs of various group members be surfaced? How do these hidden factors and feelings influence member behaviors and team interactions when conflict emerges?*
- *How should the conflict be addressed appropriately, from a culturally as well as interpersonally sensitive manner?*

## Selecting a Peace-Building Project Site

*The members of an internationally mixed work team for an International Non-Governmental Organization (INGO) based in Washington DC are having challenges managing a conflict over a decision about which country should be the base for their next training of youth peace-building trainers. Leading contenders are Sri Lanka, Nepal, Nigeria, and Burundi.*

*Paul is from northern, rural Ghana. He is in his late thirties, old enough to be considered an elder in his tribe. He has worked for twelve years on development projects in West Africa. Alicia is from San Francisco. She is just back from a year doing humanitarian work in Sudan. Naoko is from Japan and this is her first job. David is from New York and just got his Master's degree in Conflict Transformation, which included an internship in Sri Lanka. Bernhard is from Germany and is spending a year in DC on leave from his job with a government agency that does development and aid projects in South and Central Asia.*

*Paul is the oldest member of the group and often calms tense situations by telling stories. Alicia considers herself a feminist and really wants to push herself professionally in the context of this team. Bernhard tends to be very direct in his communication style and work-oriented in the team, keeping the group on task and starting meetings on time. David considers himself easy going with a good sense of humor. Naoko tends to be very quiet in the group, but will sometimes make a comment at the end of a meeting about how she doesn't feel supported by the group. Other members of the group feel like they are bending over backwards to include her.*

*Paul has recently missed a few meetings. Alicia and Bernhard want to give him feedback about his participation, but he has mentioned that in his culture it is inappropriate in particular for a younger woman to give direct feedback to an older man, who should approach him indirectly through an appropriate third party. They are feeling frustrated by delays in making the decision to move forward with the next project and what they see as the lack of focus and contribution from the other team members.*

*David and Bernhard really want the next project to be in South Asia – Sri Lanka or Nepal—while Alicia and Paul want the project to be in Africa – Nigeria or Burundi. A decision must be made within a week in order to respond on time to a USAID Request for Proposal (RFP). Meetings have become more tense, there is arguing, particularly between Alicia and Bernhard, while Naoko is becoming more withdrawn, David is saying less and Paul has been increasingly absent. The situation comes to a head when Paul arrives an hour late for a meeting without having told anyone and Alicia raises her voice at him. Naoko gets upset and walks out.*

## **The Middleperson: A US American in Thailand**

*As a U.S. American female supervisor in Thailand, I found that basically all examination of group dynamics in Thailand must be done indirectly, on an individual level. In order to find out how the group is doing, you have to add up the sum total of each individual perception. For example, if there is some kind of a problem or conflict within the group, it will never come out in the open during any kind of group meeting. What will probably happen is that one or two people will either come to you in person, or they will let someone else who isn't directly involved know. This person will then talk to you. It often takes a great deal of detective work to find out exactly what the issue is, but if you talk casually with enough group members, you will probably end up with a fairly accurate picture of the problem, and no one will lose face in the process.*

*Once you know what the issues are, you have the option of taking it back to the group and discussing it together, or of taking it up in an indirect way by discussing alternative solutions with individual group members. What needs to be kept in mind is that every conversation you have with an individual is a conversation with the group, as all discussions go directly back to the rest of the group. As long as you can deal with this manner of handling conflict, you will have access to information on how the group is doing, and a channel of communication and problem-solving strategies. Discussing conflict areas directly as a group is not generally accepted in Thailand as a way to solve problems, because group members will not usually disagree with each other in public. However, once trust is built up with individuals, you can*

*get more accurate information about their feelings, as well as those of the rest of the group. Therefore, in Thailand, the individual is the group, and issues are dealt with more outside of the group than within it. All of this has taken some getting used to, but it is extremely interesting to watch it work. Things generally function smoothly if you can plug into the Thai system of information gathering.*

*Another interesting, but frustrating, dynamic is the functioning of the supervisor-coordinator work group. The new coordinator, Alice, was a U.S. American and had never lived in another culture before. Since she was unused to adapting her very direct style of communication, our dealings as a group were less than productive. I became the spokesperson for the group of supervisors. The two Thai supervisors felt strongly about certain issues and wanted Alice to know their feelings. They were, however, very hesitant to talk to her themselves at first because of the Thai code of indirectness.*

*Because I am a fairly direct person, I was less hesitant to discuss concerns, especially things that were really affecting all three of us in a very negative way. Unfortunately, I lost credibility with Alice, because, although I assured her that I was speaking for the group, she didn't trust my assessment of the Thai perspective. She wanted to hear directly from them, not understanding why they were not coming to her directly. The end result was that Alice looked upon me as a troublemaker who was trying to come between her and the Thai supervisors. I still am not sure how I could have handled this better. What started out as observations and suggestions which Alice had requested, ended up being perceived as threats to her leadership. This resulted in an unhealthy sort of competition between us. Having never experienced this in any previous work situation, I probably did not react well to it. It seemed like anything I did to try to help the situation was taken as a confrontation and a test of her authority. In the long run, I withdrew and stopped taking the role of the middleperson, and the two supervisors became more direct about the important issues.*

## **Assessment Instruments**

### ***Team Assessment: Styles, Emotions, Needs, Sensitivity***

The following four-step 'SENSE' collective assessment exercise is a participatory self-reflective exploration to be undertaken by a multicultural team or task group. The goal is to reveal the many hidden dimensions of personal style, cultural socialization, emotions, and needs that impact conflict dynamics in groups. Once these underlying influences are made transparent by the process of bringing them to the



surface, the team can creatively address how to address its conflict in a sensitive and more effective manner.

*Styles:* Have all members of the group reflect about conflicts they have been involved in during the past few years either privately, by journal writing, or by sharing personal stories with a partner. Applying some of the categories from this chapter as well as creatively describing personal behaviors, each person should characterize his or her own style of dealing with conflict and try to assess which parts of their tendencies are personal versus culturally influenced. Each team member can list 3–5 characteristics of their personal and/or cultural conflict style, and communicate those that feel safe to be shared with the team.

*Emotions:* Everyone on the team anonymously writes a list of possible private emotions or other hidden factors potentially within group members that might influence their behavior in a conflict. Each team member should write some of their own needs and feelings as well as what they imagine belong to others in the group without distinguishing between their own and others.

*Needs:* The team brainstorms how underlying interests or needs might impact member behaviors and team interactions, either in a current conflict, or a conflict that might surface.

*Sensitivity:* Based on the information gathered from generating these three previous lists, the team discusses potential ways to take effective action and appropriately address a intra-group conflict in a culturally and interpersonally sensitive manner: Try to make SENSE of it all.

### ***Tools for Assessing Individual Conflict Styles in Groups***

There are two notable instruments for measuring individual styles of dealing with conflict, based on (1) personal preferences (Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument), and (2) culturally learned behaviors that influence approaches to conflict (Hammer Intercultural Conflict Style Inventory).

#### **Personal Conflict Styles**

The *Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument* (TKI) is “designed to assess an individual’s behavior in conflict situations” (Thomas and Kilmann 2001). The TKI can be taken, or a copy purchased, online. The TKI creates a score that reflects one’s repertoire of conflict-handling skills along the dimensions of assertiveness and cooperativeness, one’s primary preference among the five conflict styles of *avoiding*, *accommodating*, *coercing*, *compromising*, or *collaborating*, and suggests when to most effectively apply each style. The Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory (ROCI) can also be used to measure preferred conflict styles using similar categories: *avoiding*, *obliging*, *dominating*, *compromising*, and *integrating* (Rahim 1983).

## Cultural Conflict Styles

The Hammer Intercultural Conflict Style Inventory (ICS) Inventory assesses “culturally-learned approaches for managing disputes” (Hammer 2005) along dimensions of direct versus indirect and emotionally expressive versus restrained approaches to conflict. Combinations of these culturally-influenced preferences for conflict engagement result in four distinct styles for cross-cultural conflict resolution: discussion, engagement, accommodation, and dynamic styles.

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