Conflict Resolution

**What is Conflict?**

Learning Objectives

Upon completing this chapter, you should be able to:

* describe a number of general types of conflict;
* identify sources of misunderstanding, differences, and conflict in the workplace;
* explain how communication in different cases escalates misunderstanding, differences, and conflict in the workplace;
* describe your conflict resolution style; and
* describe ground rules for communication and strategies to resolve conflict.

This chapter begins with an overview of what conflict is, in this case, the struggle that happens when people feel they have incompatible goals, wants, demands, or needs. The focus then moves to types of conflict you are likely to experience—such as structural, relationship, or interactional—as you try to communicate interpersonally in modern work settings.

You will learn about the five phases of conflict, including prelude, triggering event, initiation differentiation, and resolution. This knowledge allows you to take a step back from a conflict situation to understand where you are so you can make better choices that enhance interpersonal communication instead of further fuel conflict.

Similarly, you will learn about common reactions to conflict. Some of these reactions help to diffuse the situation, for example, postponing, fogging, or coalition formation. You’ll also gain knowledge about approaches like gunnysacking, backstabbing, or threats that can escalate or worsen the conflict.

Competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding, and accommodating are the categories of styles or approaches people typically use to manage conflict.

Finally, the chapter winds down with a review of group conflict resolution strategies, with a detailed section on the usefulness of active listening.

For the interpersonal communicator, this chapter provides an opportunity to develop knowledge and skill in how to use conflict to clarify and improve communication, instead of having conflict lead to stalemates and further communication breakdown.

The word “conflict” produces a sense of anxiety for many people, but it is part of the human experience. Conflict is inevitable, but we can improve our handling of disagreements, misunderstandings, and struggles in the workplace to make it easier to manage when it does occur. Hocker and Wilmot (1991) offer us several principles on conflict that have been adapted here for our discussion:

* Conflict is universal.
* Conflict is associated with incompatible goals.
* Conflict is associated with scarce resources.
* Conflict is associated with interference.
* Conflict is not a sign of a poor relationship.
* Conflict cannot be avoided.
* Conflict cannot always be resolved.
* Conflict is not always bad.

McLean (2005) defines conflict as the physical or psychological struggle associated with the perception of opposing or incompatible goals, desires, demands, wants, or needs. When incompatible goals, scarce resources, or interference are present, conflict often results, but it doesn’t mean the relationship is poor or failing. All relationships progress through times of conflict and collaboration. The way we navigate and negotiate these challenges influences, reinforces, or destroys the relationship. Rather than viewing conflict negatively, view it as an opportunity for clarification and growth.

**Types of Conflict**

Conflict can arise for a variety of reasons. Usually, the conflicts you encounter in the workplace are one of these seven types:

**Structural**

* Problems with the way a situation is set up (i.e., who is involved, geographical and physical relationships, unequal power and authority, impact of underlying processes, impact of external events).

For example, structural reasons for conflict could be things such as difficulty setting times to meet with colleagues who are in different time zones, one person thinks they are “in charge” but other members of the group don’t agree, the business processes take a lot of time to implement so it is is hard to get things done on time, etc.

**Relationship**

* Often a cause of conflict, relationship conflict may arise from poor communication, stereotyping, misconceptions, and time constraints.

For example, relationship triggers for a conflict could resemble the following scenarios: a couple of group members do not answer emails in a timely way, holding up progress for others; someone assumes that a certain person’s disability will prevent them from participating in a project, without asking the person what they feel confident in doing; a supervisor moves up a deadline so that the group is under increasing time pressure, etc.

**Interaction**

* Some people have not developed their skills in interacting with others.This can be a source of conflict, particularly when one’s needs are not met by others. Interaction challenges can lead to negative responses such as avoidance and attack.

For example, interaction triggers can occur when a solitary worker is required to work in a team-oriented culture or when a worker doesn’t realize that their poor time-management skills are affecting the team’s ability to complete a project on time.

**Values and Identity**

* We all have different values and perceptions. When these do not align within a working group, or when they are challenged, they can cause conflict.

For example, values-and-identity triggers can occur when a colleague tells another that their method is “wrong” or when a worker refuses to work on a project because it doesn’t align with their personal beliefs (i.e., there is misalignment with the person’s political or religious views).

**Data**

* Lack of information, or conflicting information, causes considerable conflict in the workplace.

For example, data triggers can occur in an instance where a manager has told a subordinate what the deliverables of a project are, but another team member has been instructed by a different manager with a different set of goals.

**Cultural**

* Cultural conflict arises when there is misunderstanding of group norms, confusion over language and communication styles, or underlying trust is missing.

For example, cultural triggers can occur when a new employee joins a workplace where the business culture is different from the one she left, or when people from different cultural backgrounds work on the same team but misunderstand meanings because of language barrier.

**The Five Phases of Conflict**

When you experience conflict at work, you may notice that there are five distinct stages, as follows:

1. Prelude
2. Triggering Event
3. Initiation
4. Differentiation
5. Resolution

To give you some context, we’ll examine a workplace conflict scenario.

Conflict at Work

Adam and Connor work for a large financial firm, advising clients on the financial services the company sells. Their job titles are the same, and their desks are opposite from each other within an open office environment. Adam has been with the firm for 15 years but likes to keep to himself, as he is quite introverted. Still a relatively new employee, Connor puts in many hours trying to build up his client base. He has done the training that Human Resources asked him to do, and he tries to follow the company rules and procedures. He is quite extroverted and social and seems to be getting along well with his colleagues. Their line manager, Eva, is pleased with Connor’s work, so far.

The line manager has assigned Adam to be Connor’s “buddy” and to assist in helping Connor settle in. Much of their day is spent working on the computer, meeting with clients, and communicating with stakeholders at various levels.

Connor has noticed that Adam is not as time-sensitive as he is; Adam arrives late on most days, but Connor doesn’t know that Adam works late most nights because he prefers to work after others have gone home for the day. Connor has tried to schedule a check-in meeting with Adam a few times, but each time he does, Adam says, “Don’t worry. We’ll catch up when I get in tomorrow.” By the time Adam arrives late for work, Connor has clients coming in to meet with him.

This morning the men had a meeting scheduled for 9 a.m. It is now 9:30, and Adam has just arrived and is taking off his coat. “Morning, Adam,” Connor says, “I was hoping we could catch up at 9 this morning, and we keep missing each other. I have a few questions. Are you still able to fit me in?”

Adam rolls his eyes. “Honestly, the gig’s not that complicated,” he replies. “I really don’t have time to babysit you!” Then he storms off to get a coffee.

First, we need to identify the prelude to the conflict. What is the scene, and who is involved? Here we know that we have two male colleagues working at the same level within the organization. We have no third parties involved, but the setting is relatively public. The two men sit at desks in an open office, so it is likely that others in the environment overheard the exchange.

Second, we need to identify the triggering event. The following variables are some examples of triggering events:

* a rebuff—asking for an action that is not met
* an illegitimate demand—imposing wants and needs on another person
* criticism—finding fault with others’ action
* non-cumulative annoyance—realizing differences in attitude and opinions
* cumulative annoyance—realizing recurring differences
* mutual cumulative annoyance—mutually involved in creating recurring annoyances

On this occasion the main triggering event is a rebuff. Connor tried to line up a meeting with Adam several times, but Adam did not follow through. However, some of these other triggers are also playing a part here. Management has imposed needs on Adam, an an introverted person who prefers to work in a solitary way and, thus, doesn’t really want to comply with being Connor’s “buddy.” There are also recurring differences between the two men’s working styles. But these are secondary to the primary event.

Third, we need to consider the initiation phase. Now that Connor has perceived the triggering event, he has three options. He can either

1. confront Adam,
2. avoid the issue, or
3. take another action.

Conflict is needed to clarify the issue, but, naturally, Connor feels a bit angry and anxious about the situation. He is unaware of the anxiety and frustration that Adam is also feeling. His perception is that Adam doesn’t like him or doesn’t want to be helpful, but the reality is that Adam is not comfortable being a work buddy, because of his solitary nature—and he is struggling to express this in a productive way. Connor’s anxiety about the situation could lead him to avoid the issue altogether, depending on his personality.

Fourth, we need to consider the differentiation phase. This is the phase where the conflict is contained, agreed, or escalated. The conflict could be

* **passed**—in the sense that the issue is ignored or dropped (for example, Connor could decide not to say anything and forget about the problem);
* **refocused**—whereby a complaint is made but the responsibility for it is put onto an external party (for example, Connor could ask his line manager, Eve, to sort out the problem); or
* **mitigated**—in the sense that a complaint is made but worked out (for example, Connor and Adam could discuss the issues, perhaps with a third-party such as Eve, to come to an agreement). If this is to work, both parties need to be responsive during the conversation, using active listening techniques and validating each other’s points of view during interactions.

Lastly, we need to look at the resolution phase. In this step the conflict is resolved. There are two possible outcomes:

* Resolution: This is the best-case scenario, a win–win. In this outcome, both parties are satisfied and will not need to deal with the situation again. For example, in this situation, a resolution might be found by matching up Connor with a “buddy” whose working style is more closely aligned with his own.
* Management: This is a less preferred scenario, in that a solution has been found but one party is unsatisfied with it. It is likely that, with this outcome, the issue will arise again. For example, in Adam and Connor’s conflict, their line manager might tell Adam that mentoring Connor is part of his job and that he will be disciplined if he does not comply. Perhaps she will sit in on their first meeting to make sure this happens. In this case, Adam will be unsatisfied and is likely to cause some discomfort between the two men.

Stages of Conflict by L. Underwood

**Reactions to Conflict**

We all react to conflict in our own way, depending on aspects of our personality, our culture, and our previous experiences. Some reactions to conflict can make the issues worse. It is important to check your own behaviour as well as the behaviour of others when you are experiencing conflict. Here are some ways that people react to conflict:

**Reactions that can diffuse conflict**

**Reactions that can make conflict worse**

**Conflict Management Style**

Conflict Management Styles by L. Underwood
adapted from Thomas, K., & Kilmann, R. (1974)

In order to better understand the elements of the five styles of conflict management, we will apply each to the following scenario:

**Conflict Management Styles**

Rachel and Simon have been running a restaurant business together for 15 years. Rachel manages front-of-house operations and staffing, while Simon is a trained chef who looks after the kitchen. Rachel is growing frustrated because Simon has decided to spend a large portion of the profits on redecorating the restaurant, while Rachel wants to save most of the profits but spend a little on advertising. Conflicts regarding money are very common. Let’s see the numerous ways that Rachel and Simon could address this problem.

Competing
The competing style indicates a high concern for self and a low concern for other. When we compete, we are striving to “win” the conflict, potentially at the expense or “loss” of the other person. One way we may gauge our win is by being granted or taking concessions from the other person. For example, if Simon pays the decorators to get started right away, he is taking an indirect competitive route resulting in a “win” for him by simply getting his way.

The competing style also involves the use of power, which can be non-coercive or coercive (Sillars, 1980). Non-coercive strategies include requesting and persuading. When we request, we suggest that our conflict partner change a behaviour. Requesting doesn’t require a high level of information exchange. When we persuade, however, we give our conflict partner reasons to support our request or suggestion, meaning there is more information exchange, which may make persuading more effective than requesting.

Rachel could try to persuade Simon to spend on advertising by showing him the positive return on investment (ROI) that the restaurant received on their last advertising campaign, or by showing him that customer numbers are steadily falling, and arguing that they need to advertise for continued viability of the business.

Coercive strategies violate standard guidelines for ethical communication and may include aggressive communication directed at rousing your partner’s emotions through insults, profanity, and yelling, or through threats of punishment if you do not get your way. If Rachel works more hours than Simon, she could use that power to threaten to not come in for her shifts if Simon doesn’t do what she wants. In these scenarios, the “win” that could result is only short term and can lead to conflict escalation.

Interpersonal conflict is rarely isolated, meaning there can be ripple effects that connect the current conflict to previous and future conflicts. Simon’s behind-the-scenes spending or Rachel’s missed shifts could lead to built-up negative emotions that could further test their partnership.

Competing has been linked to aggression, although the two are not always paired. If assertiveness does not work, there is a chance it could escalate to hostility. There is a pattern of verbal escalation: requests, demands, complaints, angry statements, threats, harassment, and verbal abuse (Johnson and Roloff, 2000).

The competing style of conflict management is not the same thing as having a competitive personality. Competition in relationships isn’t always negative, and people who enjoy engaging in competition may not always do so at the expense of another person’s goals. But in the workplace, competition can be a challenge. For example, if an opportunity for a promotion presents itself, you may find that you and your colleagues are all competing for the position. This may result in improved efficiency for the department, but it could also result in negative feelings towards one another, if only one person is selected for the promotion.

**Avoiding**
The avoiding style of conflict management often indicates a low concern for self and a low concern for others. In some cultures that emphasize group harmony over individual interests, avoiding a conflict can indicate a high level of concern for others. In general, avoiding doesn’t mean that there is no communication about the conflict. Remember, it is impossible not to communicate. Even if you don’t verbalize your point of view, your actions will show others something about how you are feeling. Even when we try to avoid conflict, we may be giving our feelings away through our verbal and non-verbal communication. Rachel’s sarcastic tone as she tells Simon that he’s “Soooo good with money!” and his subsequent eye roll both bring the conflict to the surface without specifically addressing it. The avoiding style is either passive or indirect, meaning there is a higher chance of the listener inaccurately decoding the speaker’s intended message, which may make this strategy less effective than others. You may decide to avoid conflict for many different reasons, some of which are better than others. If you view the conflict as having little importance to you, it may be better to ignore it. If the person you’re having conflict with will only be working in your office for a week, you may perceive a conflict to be temporary and choose to avoid it and hope that it will solve itself. If you are not emotionally invested in the topic, you may be able to reframe your perspective and see the situation in a different way, thus resolving the issue. In all these cases, avoiding doesn’t really require an investment of time, emotion, or communication skill, so there is not much at stake.

Avoidance is not always an easy conflict management choice, because sometimes the person we have conflict with isn’t a temp in our office or a weekend houseguest. While it may be easy to tolerate a problem when you’re not personally invested in it, when faced with a situation like Rachel and Simon’s, avoidance would just make the problem worse. For example, avoidance could first manifest as changing the subject, then progress from avoiding the issue to avoiding the person altogether, to even ending the partnership.

Indirect strategies of hinting and joking also fall under the avoiding style. While these indirect avoidance strategies may lead to a buildup of frustration or even anger, they allow us to vent a little of our built-up steam and may make a conflict situation more bearable. When we hint, we drop clues for our partner will identify, hoping that they will change their behaviour, thereby solving the problem without any direct communication. But in doing this, make sure you don’t overestimate your partner’s detective abilities. For example, when Rachel leaves the account statement on the desk in hopes that Simon will realize the impact he would make on the restaurant’s finances if he spent a lot of money on redecoration, Simon may simply ignore it or even get irritated with Rachel for not putting the statement with all the other mail. We also overestimate our partner’s ability to decode the jokes we make about a conflict situation. It is more likely that the receiver of the jokes will feel provoked or insulted than find humour in your joke, if tension between you two already exists. So more frustration may develop when the hints and jokes are not decoded, which often leads to passive-aggressive behaviour.

Passive-aggressive behaviour is a way of dealing with conflict in which one person indirectly communicates their negative thoughts or feelings through non-verbal behaviours, such as not completing a task. For example, Rachel may wait a few days to deposit money into the bank so Simon can’t withdraw it to purchase decorating supplies, or Simon may cancel plans for a staff party because he feels that Rachel is questioning his responsibility with money. Although passive-aggressive behaviour can feel rewarding in the moment, it is one of the most unproductive ways to deal with conflict. These behaviours may create additional conflicts and may lead to a cycle of passive-aggressiveness in which the other partner begins to exhibit these behaviours as well, while never actually addressing the conflict that started it all. In most avoidance situations, both parties lose. However, avoidance can be the most appropriate strategy in some situations—for example, when the conflict is temporary, when the stakes are low, when there is little personal investment, or when there is the potential for violence or retaliation.

**Accommodating**
The accommodating conflict management style indicates a low concern for self and a high concern for others and is often viewed as passive or submissive, in that one person obliges another without providing personal input. The motivation behind accommodating plays an important role in whether or not it is an appropriate strategy. Generally, we accommodate because we are being generous, we are obeying, or we are yielding (Bobot, 2010). If we are being generous, we accommodate because we genuinely want to; if we are obeying, we don’t have a choice but to accommodate (perhaps because of the potential for negative consequences or punishment); and if we yield, we may have our own views or goals but give up on them because of fatigue, time constraints, or because a better solution has been offered. Accommodating can be appropriate when there is little chance that our own goals can be achieved, when we don’t have much to lose by accommodating, when we feel we are wrong, or when advocating for our own needs could negatively affect the relationship (Isenhart & Spangle, 2000).

The occasional accommodation can be useful in maintaining a relationship. For example, Rachel may say, “It’s OK that you want to spend the money on redecorating this time.” However, being a team player can slip into being a pushover, which will not work in your favour in the long term. If Rachel keeps telling Simon, “It’s OK this time,” their business may be short on profit at the end of the year. At that point, Rachel and Simon’s conflict may escalate as they question each other’s motives, or the conflict may spread if they direct their frustration at other staff members.

Research has shown that the accommodating style is more likely to occur when there are time restraints and less likely to occur when someone does not want to appear weak (Cai & Fink, 2002). If you’re standing outside the movie theatre and two movies are starting, you may say, “Let’s see the movie you wanted to see,” so you don’t miss the beginning. But if you’re a new manager at an electronics store and an employee wants to take Sunday off to watch a football game, you may say no to set an example for the other employees. As with avoiding, there are certain cultural influences we will discuss later that make accommodating a more effective strategy.

**Compromising**
The compromising style shows a moderate concern for self and others and may indicate low investment in the conflict and/or the relationship. Even though we often hear that the best way to handle a conflict is to compromise, the compromising style isn’t a win–win solution; it is a partial win–lose. In essence, when we compromise, we give up some or most of what we want. It’s true that the conflict gets resolved temporarily, but lingering thoughts of what you gave up could lead to a future conflict. Compromising may be a good strategy when there are time limitations or when prolonging a conflict may lead to relationship deterioration. Compromise may also be good when both parties have equal power or when other resolution strategies have not worked (Macintosh and Stevens, 2008).

Compromising is that it may be used as an easy way out of a conflict. The compromising style is most effective when both parties find the solution agreeable. Rachel and Simon could decide to paint the restaurant but work with the furnishings they have, take out an advertisement in the local newspaper and keep the remainder of the funds in the bank. They are both giving up something, but getting part of what they each wanted. If the pair agrees that the advertising funds should come out of Simon’s food budget, however, the compromise isn’t as equitable, and Simon, although he agreed to the compromise, may end up with feelings of resentment.

**Collaborating**
The collaborating style involves a high degree of concern for self and others, and usually indicates investment in the conflict situation and the relationship. Although the collaborating style takes the most work in terms of communication competence, it ultimately leads to a win–win situation in which neither party has to make concessions because a mutually beneficial solution is discovered or created. The obvious advantage is that both parties are satisfied, which could lead to positive problem solving in the future and strengthen the overall relationship. For example, Rachel and Simon may agree to do the redecorating themselves rather than paying a decorator, and to advertise using social media because they can manage this themselves for minimal cost. This way, they can bank the profits minus the small expenditures incurred. In this case, they didn’t make the conflict personal but focused on the situation and came up with a solution that may end up saving them money. The disadvantage is that this style is often time consuming, and potentially only one person may be willing to use this approach while the other person is eager to compete to meet their goals or willing to accommodate.

Here are some tips for collaborating and achieving a win–win outcome (Hargie, 2011):

* Do not view the conflict as a contest you are trying to win.
* Remain flexible and realize there are solutions yet to be discovered.
* Distinguish the people from the problem (don’t make it personal).
* Determine what the underlying needs are that are driving the other person’s demands (needs can still be met through different demands).
* Identify areas of common ground or shared interests that you can work from to develop solutions.
* Ask questions to allow them to clarify and to help you understand their perspective.
* Listen carefully and provide verbal and non-verbal feedback.

**Strategies for Resolving Conflict**

**In Groups**

Since we know that conflict will happen and that it can strengthen relationships when handled correctly, we would do well to set up ground rules for handling it when it does, inevitably, arise. When people believe strongly about the outcomes they are trying to reach, conflict is more likely to arise, so, conflict can sometimes be an indicator of an engaged and passionate group that will ultimately be successful.

* Outline conflict management strategies when the group first comes together.
* Establish good communication from the start.
* Take notes and/or have someone create meeting minutes for the record.
* Focus on timely issues rather than bringing problems from the past or worries for the future into the conversation.
* On topics of conflict, clarify each member’s position.
* Acknowledge emotional topics and establish the root of a person’s emotional response.
* Have each member outline the facts and assumptions on which their position is based.
* At the end of conversations and meetings, establish next actions and responsibilities.
* Organize smaller discussions among subsets of members and then bring suggestions to the larger group.
* To reach consensus in the large group, take a vote.

**With Challenging People**

We all have to work with challenging people from time to time. Someone’s negative attitude or unwillingness to co-operate can cause stress and friction for colleagues and teams. Though it’s much easier said than done, try not to let these people get to you. Sometimes the adage that your parents might have told you, “Kill them with kindness,” really is the best way to handle this! However you choose to handle this, it is imperative that you remain professional at all times. If you don’t, you’ll be risking your reputation, too. Here are some tips for dealing with difficult people at work:

**Consider why the person is behaving this way**.

Think back to what you learned about Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. Often, when a person directs anger towards you, it is not about you at all, but about some other problem in their day or an unmet need. When people lash out, they do so, frequently, because they feel threatened or perceive that they are not being heard. Can you change your approach to remove these barriers? You may be able to improve communication by doing so.

**Check your own behaviour.**

Did you wake up “on the wrong side of the bed” this morning? Sometimes we give off negative feelings without really meaning to. Think about how your tone and language might have provoked a response. If you do realize that you were responsible for a negative interaction, apologize and ask if you can start over. This can reduce bad feelings and get communication back on track.

**Speak in private**

It will be uncomfortable for you and the person you are struggling to communicate with to have a difficult conversation when the whole office can hear you. Ask the person politely if you can have a chat in private to see if you can resolve the issue. Importantly, when you sit down together, be cautious about the language you use. Use “I” rather than “you”-focused wording. For example, “I feel like there might be some tension between us…” rather than “You were so rude to me this morning!”

**Focus on the actionable items.**

Also, when you speak, make sure not to blame, accuse, or dredge up past experiences. Attend to the current issue only.

**Find common ground**.

One of the best ways to build rapport with someone is to find out what you have in common. Sharing a laugh over a favourite movie that you share or a tip for a hobby that you have in common can break the ice and get the conversation flowing more naturally.

**Get reinforcements or support.**

If you don’t feel able to resolve the negativity on your own, get some help. You can either speak to a colleague that you trust, or to a superior. Do make sure you approach this in a way that does not look like gossiping or complaining, though. The goal here is to find a resolution to a problem, not to badmouth another person. Ask for advice from someone you trust, privately, about how they would handle the situation. Or if things have become so uncomfortable that you need someone else to speak to the person who you are in conflict with, you may need to ask a superior to intervene.

**Minimize encounters.**

If you are unable to resolve the matter with the person privately and you’re not sure how else to handle the problem, sometimes the simplest way to handle this is to minimize the amount of time that you need to spend together. Be cordial and do not make a point to avoid the person, but try to work on different projects to minimize opportunities for conflict. This isn’t the ideal solution, though!

**Active Listening**

Active listening starts before you receive a message. Active listeners make strategic choices to set up ideal listening conditions. You can manage physical and environmental noises by moving locations or by manipulating the lighting, temperature, or furniture, for example. Avoid scheduling important listening activities during times (or in conditions/environments) when you anticipate psychological or physiological noise that would pose a distraction. For example, we often know when we’re going to be hungry, full, more awake, less awake, more anxious, or less anxious; planning in  advance can prevent the presence of these barriers.

In terms of cognitive barriers to effective listening, we can prime ourselves to listen by analyzing a listening situation before it begins. For example, you could ask yourself the following questions:

* What are my goals for listening to this message?
* How does this message relate to me?
* What listening type and style are most appropriate for this message?

Effective listeners must work to maintain focus as much as possible and refocus when attention shifts or fades (Wolvin and Coakley, 1993). One way to do this is to find the motivation to listen. If you can identify intrinsic and or extrinsic motivations for listening to a particular message, then you will be more likely to remember the information presented. Ask yourself how a message could leave an impression on your life, your career, your intellect, or your relationships. As we ponder such implications, we can overcome our tendency toward selective attention.

Listening techniques can help with concentration and memory. **Mental bracketing** refers to the process of intentionally separating out intrusive or irrelevant thoughts that may distract you from listening (McCornack, 2007). This requires that we monitor our concentration and attention and be prepared to let thoughts that aren’t related to a speaker’s message pass through our minds without our giving them much attention. **Mnemonic devices** are techniques that can aid in information recall (Hargie, 2011). Starting in ancient Greece and Rome, educators used these devices to help people remember information. They work by imposing order and organization on information. Three main mnemonic devices are acronyms, rhymes, and visualization.

Tips to Improve Active Listening

Julian Treasure’s short TED Talk, *5 Ways to Listen Better*, provides helpful tips and guidelines to improve your own active listening skills. Watch it below or at <https://tinyurl.com/yd3afhop>

**Active Listening Behaviours**

We can prepare for active listening in advance and engage in certain cognitive strategies to help us listen better. We also engage in active listening behaviours as we receive and process messages.

Eye contact is a key sign of active listening. Speakers usually interpret a listener’s eye contact as a signal of attentiveness. While a lack of eye contact may indicate inattentiveness, it can also signal cognitive processing. When we look away to process new information, we usually do it unconsciously. Be aware, however, that your conversational partner may interpret this as not listening. If you really do need to take a moment to think about something, you could indicate that to the other person by saying, “That’s new information to me. Give me just a second to think through it.” An occasional head nod and “uh-huh” signal that you are paying attention. However, when we give these cues as a form of “autopilot” listening, others can usually tell that we are pseudo-listening, and whether they call us on it or not, that impression could lead to negative judgments.

A more direct way to indicate active listening is to reference previous statements made by the speaker. Norms of politeness usually call on us to reference a past statement or connect to the speaker’s current thought before starting a conversational turn. Being able to summarize what someone said to ensure that the topic has been satisfactorily covered and understood or being able to segue in such a way that validates what the previous speaker said helps regulate conversational flow. Asking probing questions is another way to directly indicate listening and to keep a conversation going, since they encourage and invite a person to speak more. You can also ask questions that seek clarification and not just elaboration. Speakers should present complex information at a slower speaking rate than familiar information, but many will not. Remember that your non-verbal feedback can be useful for a speaker, as it signals that you are listening but also whether or not you understand. If a speaker fails to read your nonverbal feedback, you may need to follow up with verbal communication in the form of paraphrased messages and clarifying questions.

As active listeners, we want to be excited and engaged, but don’t let excitement manifest itself in interruptions. Being an active listener means knowing when to maintain our role as listener and resist the urge to take a conversational turn.

Note-taking can also indicate active listening. Translating information through writing into our own cognitive structures and schemata allows us to better interpret and assimilate information. Of course, note-taking isn’t always a viable option. It would be fairly awkward to take notes during a first date or a casual exchange between new coworkers. But in some situations where we wouldn’t normally consider taking notes, a little awkwardness might be worth it for the sake of understanding and recalling the information. For example, many people don’t think about taking notes when getting information from their doctor or banker. To help facilitate your note-taking, you might say something like “Do you mind if I jot down some notes? This seems important.”

Active listening is exhibited through verbal and non-verbal cues, including steady eye contact with the speaker; smiling; slightly raised eyebrows; upright posture; body position that is leaned in toward the speaker; non-verbal cues such as head nods; verbal cues such as “OK,” “mmhmm,” or “oh”; and a lack of distracting mannerisms like doodling or fidgeting (Hargie, 2011).

**Preventing Conflict with Good Business Etiquette**

There are certain expectations and unwritten rules for presenting yourself in a business context, known as **business etiquette**. These vary depending on the culture and the level of formality of the environment, but overlooking them can cause conflict and misunderstanding. For example, in some cultures the handshake is seen as overly formal, but in North America it is the standard professional greeting. Keeping the following tips in mind when navigating the professional environment in North America will help you to maintain positive, conflict-free relationships.

* **Be on time.** Tardiness is frowned-upon in our time-conscious culture.
* **Don’t interrupt.** When people are speaking, make eye contact and show that you are listening. If you have something to add, don’t interject. Rather, wait until the person has finished speaking to add your comments.
* **Dress professionally.** Make sure your clothes are clean and pressed, and dress at or slightly above the level of formality that your colleagues do.
* **Unplug during meetings.** There are few faux pas worse than being that person in a meeting who is so busy texting or reading emails that he doesn’t look up when someone speaks to him. This is not only impolite but will also cause you to miss key information because your focus is elsewhere.
* **Watch your language.** Never raise your voice in the workplace, and make sure not to use foul language in a professional environment.
* Show gratitude. It is surprising how often people neglect to say please and thank you, or to send a thank-you note or email when someone does something to help you. This will make them feel appreciated and more inclined to help you out in future.
* **Remember names.** A trick to help you remember the name of a person you just met is to use their name three times in the first conversation you have. Make a note of someone’s name or get their business card.
* **Leave your habits at home.** Nail biting or trimming, smoking, chewing tobacco, chewing gum loudly, talking with your mouth full, spitting, wiping your hands on your clothes, blowing your nose loudly in an open office—these are all unpleasant habits that your colleagues don’t want to witness. Please keep your professional hat on at all times in a workplace and avoid these!

**Key Takeaways and Check Ins**

This chapter introduced you to the definition, types, and five phases of conflict. You learned that some reactions to conflict can diffuse conflict, while others can escalate it.

You learned about the various conflict management styles and had an opportunity to uncover which style most closely matches your conflict management preference. You also learned about group conflict resolution strategies as well as how active listening and etiquette can be an effective conflict management and interpersonal communication tool.

Learning highlights

* The nature of conflict indicates a perception of incompatible goals, needs, wants, etc., between individuals or groups.
* Several types and sources of conflict exist.
* The five phases of conflict are prelude, triggering event, initiation, differentiation, and resolution.
* Conflict management styles include competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding, and accommodation.
* Active listing is a powerful tool in conflict resolution.

**Check In**

Read the scenario and answer the questions based on the scenario.

**Scenario**

Jane is the new power tools department manager for a large national home improvement store. She came into the position from another company directly into this managerial role and has been working at this home improvement store for about six months. At one of the weekly team meetings, after Jane announces a major decision about the strategic direction for the department, Dennis—who has worked at this store for 10 years—exclaims that he thinks this decision was the wrong one. Jane is flustered but decides, rather than risking the potential for an argument in front of the whole department, to acknowledge Dennis’s comment but move on with the meeting. After the meeting Jane asks Dennis to meet her in her office the next day.

Dennis believes he is going to be reprimanded for speaking his mind. He wonders why he is being singled out. After all, he is committed to the department but feels his experience has been completely overlooked in Jane’s planning. He is skeptical that someone who has not been with the company for very long could possibly know how to improve things.

During the private meeting Dennis asks Jane why she wanted to meet. Jane expresses her disappointment in his response to the announcement the day before. Dennis crosses his arms and says, “I’m sorry you feel that way, but if you knew what you were doing, we wouldn’t be having this conversation.”

Jane’s voice increases in volume, and she tells Dennis that his behaviour and disrespect will not be tolerated. She tells him that he can either shape up and work with the team, or find another job. When faced with the possibility that it could mean losing his job, Dennis replies, “Fine. We will go with your plan.”