

**Fifth Edition**

# Interpersonal Conflict

**William W. Wilmot**

**Joyce L. Hocker**

# Interpersonal Conflict

---

**Fifth Edition**

**William W. Wilmot**

University of Montana

**Joyce L. Hocker**



Boston, Massachusetts Burr Ridge, Illinois Dubuque, Iowa  
Madison, Wisconsin New York, New York San Francisco, California St. Louis, Missouri

# McGraw-Hill

A Division of The McGraw-Hill Companies

## INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT

Copyright 1998 by The McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc. All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America. Except as permitted under the United States Copyright Act of 1976, no part of this publication may be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means, or stored in a data base or retrieval system, without the prior written permission of the publisher.



This book is printed on recycled, acid-free paper containing 10% postconsumer waste.

4 5 6 7 8 9 0 QPF QPF 9 0 9

ISBN 0-697-32724-8

Sponsoring editor: *Marjorie Byers*  
Developmental editor: *Jennie Katsaros*  
Marketing manager: *Carl Leonard*  
Project manager: *Terry Routley*  
Production supervisor: *Sandy Hahn*  
Cover designer: *Ellen Pettengell*  
Cover image: *Digital Stock Professional;  
Sunsets, Skies, and Weather*  
Compositor: *ElectraGraphics, Inc.*  
Typeface: *10/12 Times Roman*  
Printer: *Quebecor Printing Book Group/Fairfield*

## Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Wilmot, William W.

Interpersonal Conflict / Wilmot/Hocker. — 5th ed.  
p. cm.

Hocker's name appears first on the earlier editions.

Includes bibliographical references and indexes.

ISBN 0-697-32724-8

1. Interpersonal conflict. 2. Conflict (Psychology) I. Hocker,  
Joyce L. II. Title.

HM132.H62 1997

303.6—dc21

97-8560

CIP

<http://www.mhhe.com>

# Interpersonal Conflict

---

# Preface

This book is a complete guide to interpersonal conflict. The central principles of effective conflict management are examined in all types of contexts—from romantic relationships to the workplace.

The fifth edition retains all the popular features of earlier editions while incorporating over 200 new reports of the latest research. Many of the chapters are expanded and enlivened with considerably more analysis and examples from the workplace and other public contexts. In addition, throughout the book, increased focus is directed toward the influences of culture and gender.

Chapter 1 reviews conflict assumptions, metaphors about conflict, and the framing effects of culture and gender. The new lens model of conflict demonstrates how partners have different perceptions in all conflicts and how these also differ from outsider views.

Chapter 2 presents the often quoted definition of conflict refined in the previous editions. The spirals of destructive and constructive conflict demonstrate the interactive dynamics that escalate in all disputes.

New illustrations enhance the presentation of content, relational, identity (face-saving), and procedural goals in chapter 3. Here you will find useful new insights forged from intervention into disputes in personal relationships and organizations.

Chapter 4 expands on the major ways people conceptualize power and shows how these views affect struggles as they unfold. This chapter sharpens the treatment of either/or and both/and perspectives found in earlier editions.

New insights appear in chapter 5 regarding avoidance, verbal aggressiveness, and violence. The new information is challenging and worth a close read, for at the heart of all conflict dynamics are the communicative choices made by the parties involved.

The assessment devices that many of you found so useful are still resident in chapter 6. Each of these have been refined in response to your suggestions.

Chapter 7 not only covers the now standard approaches to negotiation but extends the analysis into some of the latest feminist views of negotiation. Many new examples bring negotiation principles into our everyday lives.

Chapter 8 has a dual task—showing how to move out of avoidance and also how to self-regulate destructive moves. You will find very useful information on how to alter both of these patterns and move conflict into a constructive zone.

Chapter 9 has been almost totally revised and expanded. The explosion of interest in mediation is evident in this chapter, with extensive information about types of mediation and the skills needed for successful mediation. A significant component on different cultural methods for handling conflict will pique your interest, for it challenges some widely held assumptions about conflict management and gives us a backdrop for reviewing

mainstream cultural practices. Also, new information on how to design dispute systems is useful for preventative conflict management.

If you are interested in becoming a dispute resolver, the appendix is worth a look. Useful resources, many of which can be instantly accessed on the Internet, can be found here. For example, you can locate community dispute centers where you can volunteer, and find graduate programs in conflict management.

Any feedback you have about this edition will be warmly received. Please send correspondence to the following addresses:

Bill Wilmot  
Department of Communication Studies  
University of Montana  
Missoula, MT 59812

Joyce Hocker  
210 North Higgins  
Suite 309  
Missoula, MT 59802

---

# Acknowledgments

## From Bill:

In the past few years, numerous people have allowed me to assist them in transforming their work struggles from destructive conflict to collaborative solutions. These leaps of faith have greatly enriched the insights in this book, and I am deeply appreciative of the courageous spirit of these people. Thanks to you all—you have shown that new levels of relationship can emerge from conflicts.

The continuing positive reception to the principles of constructive conflict by participants in classes and workshops serves to energize me. Just when I begin to have an energy dip, someone tells me about the impact this book has had—and I come back to the task with renewed commitment. During my professional career, I have tended to move from topic to topic, seeking new challenges. That I have been teaching conflict for twenty years now is rather amazing, and if it continues to work well for others, I may be doing it twenty years from now. So, “thanks” to you all.

Professionally, Elaine Yarbrough, president of the Yarbrough Group, is a continuing pleasure in our joint work on conflict and mediation. She, Mike Burr, and Lindsay are my Boulder, Colorado, family—a deep and abiding connection over the years. My facilitation, mediation, and training work has been enriched beyond measure by this association.

Effective conflict requires a continuing expansion of one’s limits. My spiritual growth has been in response to the kindness of many teachers and fellow practitioners in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. Special appreciation goes to the Ven. Thubten Chodron, Ven. Kirti Tschensab Rinpoche, Lama Thubten Zopa Rinpoche, and the resident teachers of the Kopan course. The unrelenting emphasis on one’s responsibility for one’s reactions continues to both challenge and support me. A special debt will always be owed to the fellow members of Osel Shen Phen Ling who warmly welcome me back after each trip and absence.

My sincerest thanks to all the dedicated teachers in my life, from Eva Mae Reub in the primary grades in Upton, Wyoming, to Jerry Davies, my college debate coach. The passing of Dr. Patrick O. Marsh, my first college debate coach, continues to affect me. Finally, in graduate school, Dr. Kenneth Sereno ignited my long-dormant mind, and Dr. Orville Pence wrote AFU on my paper—two crucial turning points.

If you are interested in undergraduate or graduate studies in communication, you might want to check out the superb teachers, mentors, and scholars in the Department of Communication Studies at the University of Montana. We have a fine program, and the faculty actually like one another and treat students well. Our website is <http://www.umt.edu/dcs>. Thanks to you all for your support over the years—Betsy, Jim, Wes, Sara, Al, George, Debra, and Sally. You are cool.

In my personal life, the reestablishment of a romance with Mada Morgan, my college sweetheart, has brought me full circle and much joy. Who would think that a committed relationship could be so much fun? My grown children, Jason and Carina, continue to be a source of pride. Even if I weren't related to them I would enjoy them. And, Carina, thanks for the professional job on the instructor's manual and for finding some of my typos and other errors. This central cast of three is augmented by many others—my sister Joyce; my friend and “Shabin” co-owner, Roy; Bob, the mayor and chief constable of Southern Cross; and many others. Stan Rose and Greg Patent, both superb chefs, cannot be blamed for my lack of cooking talent in our eight-year-old men's group. Maybe in another decade I can conquer my culinary weaknesses.

Bill Wilmot  
Department of Communication Studies  
Missoula, Montana

### **From Joyce:**

From the perspective of five editions and twenty years of authorship of this book, I see clearly that my father, the Reverend Lamar Hocker, along with my mother, Jean Lightfoot Hocker, set in motion all that developed into my lifelong interest in this subject. I am the daughter of a Texas minister who could have kept quiet and let prevailing social norms dictate what happened in the churches he served. But he spoke up, for civil rights, the worldwide ecumenical movement, the integration of our institutions, the movement against war, and later, in partial retirement, against the devastation of our priceless Western land. Our family always knew he was right, but as children we learned that right didn't always prevail. I witnessed almost every form of destructive conflict management, along with some enlightening examples of “a better way,” in these struggles among people who were supposed to be able to get along but could not when powerful emotions were engaged. We moved often, hoping the next place would provide a compatible place for the hard truths to be explored in a peaceful environment. I grew up thinking that people ought to be able to resolve conflict while remaining together. This conviction led me to my first career in speech communication and later to my second career as a clinical psychologist. I am deeply grateful to my father for his courage and his clear voice and to my mother for her steady, quiet support along a difficult path. I know of few women my age who still claim their fathers as a hero, but I am one. Thank you to my parents for their love and guidance.

Janice Hocker Rushing, my sister and our best critic, and my brother-in-law, Tom Frentz, have provided humor, perspective, wisdom, and encouragement during this revision. Janice knows this book better than the authors do, having reviewed it many times and taught from it for years, and I value her suggestions and wise eye more than those of any other reviewer. The book was dedicated to Janice several times for this reason. I especially appreciated being able to E-mail Janice at all hours when I ran into various problems. She was always a wonderful help. Thanks again, Tom and Janice.

My women friends and colleagues continued to offer sound advice, personal support, and raucous humor during this revision. I value my longtime colleagues more than they sometimes know. Thank you to Sarah Baxter, Shan Guisinger, Diane Haddon,

Rita Sommers-Flannagan, and Marianne Spitzform, with whom I could let off steam and receive energy to keep going. I especially thank Marianne for one crucial lunchtime conversation when she helped me untangle a mess. Elaine Yarbrough, my dear friend who resolves conflict all over the world for a living, continues to offer wisdom and support. I especially enjoyed coteaching courses on gender diversity with Mike Burr during the time of this edition. Mike and I have developed creative strategies for dealing with conflict in a large corporation with employees who are being challenged to look at gender in a new way.

I am grateful to Bill Wilmot who provided a wonderful array of research resources and personal experience and who took the lead in this revision. Bill's teaching and consultation in conflict management make this book much richer—Bill is known for enlivening situations he enters, and I appreciate his energy, expertise, and timely work on this project. I am glad we are able to continue collaborating on this book, which grew out of many years of dialogue.

Finally, I am deeply grateful, again in edition 5, to my husband, Gary Hawk, who supported me in sticking with this book, working toward excellence, and writing late into the night when the schedule required. Gary often reminded me of stories I had forgotten that belonged in the book and of insights that deserved more attention, and he asked me to trust my own voice, which sometimes recedes under the burden of too much work or insufficient attention. Gary's own fascination with conflict resolution keeps me engaged in this study. I especially appreciate our Wednesdays when we work with couples, talk about the struggles we witness, and try to find ways to help love reawaken.

This is my twentieth year in Montana. I am blessed with human riches in my work and personal life and the blending of a dramatic landscape and a vital community in Missoula. I hope this book helps you appreciate the possibilities that lie hidden in conflict.

Joyce L. Hocker  
Missoula, Montana

Both authors would also like to thank the following reviewers for their valuable feedback: Nancy A. Burrell, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee; David A. Frank, University of Oregon, Honors College; Susan A. Holton, Bridgewater State College; Steven J. Madden, Clemson University; Sara Newell, West Chester University; Shirley A. Van Hoeven, Western Michigan University.

---

# Contents

Preface	ix
Acknowledgments	xi

---

## PART ONE      Conflict Components    1

---

Chapter 1	Perspectives on Conflict	2
	Why Study Conflict?	2
	Your Personal History	6
	Views of Conflict	8
	<i>Common Assumptions</i>	8
	<i>Alternative Assumptions</i>	11
	Metaphors Make a Difference	12
	<i>Metaphors That Limit Conflict</i>	13
	<i>Neutral Conflict Metaphors</i>	16
	<i>Metaphors That Expand Conflict Potential</i>	18
	<i>Mixing the Metaphors</i>	20
	Framing Effects	21
	<i>Culture Frames Conflict Interaction</i>	21
	<i>Gender Frames Conflict Interaction</i>	25
	<i>Conflict Elements Frame Conflict Interaction</i>	27
	The Lens Model of Conflict Interaction	27
	Summary	31
Chapter 2	The Nature of Conflict	32
	Conflict Defined	33
	<i>An Expressed Struggle</i>	34
	<i>Interdependence</i>	35
	<i>Perceived Incompatible Goals</i>	37
	<i>Perceived Scarce Resources</i>	38
	<i>Interference</i>	39
	The Spiral of Conflict	40
	<i>Destructive Conflict</i>	40
	<i>Constructive Conflict</i>	46

A Short Course on Conflict Management	48
<i>Clarify Communication</i>	48
<i>Check Perceptions</i>	49
Toward Productive Conflict	53
Summary	53
Chapter 3 Goals: Saving Face and Getting What You Want	54
Types of Goals	55
<i>Content Goals: What Do We Want?</i>	56
<i>Relational Goals: Who Are We to Each Other?</i>	57
<i>Identify and Face-Saving Goals: Who Am I in This Interaction?</i>	60
<i>Process Goals: What Communication Process Will Be Used?</i>	64
The Overlapping Nature of CRIP Goals	65
Shape Shifting of Goals	71
<i>Prospective Goals</i>	72
<i>Transactive Goals</i>	73
<i>Retrospective Goals</i>	76
Improving Conflict Goals	77
<i>Clarify Goals</i>	77
<i>Collaborative Goals</i>	79
Summary	81
Chapter 4 Power	82
What Is Power?	82
Views of Power	83
<i>Either/Or Power</i>	84
<i>Both/And Power</i>	85
<i>Power Denial</i>	86
Working with Power	88
<i>Power Is Ubiquitous</i>	88
<i>A Relational Theory of Power</i>	90
Power Currencies	91
Assessing Power Accurately	94
Power Imbalances	98
<i>High Power</i>	98
<i>Low Power</i>	99
Sharing Power and Collaboration	101
Realigning Power Balances	103
<i>Restraint</i>	103
<i>Focus on Interdependence</i>	104
<i>The Power of Calm Persistence</i>	105
<i>Stay Actively Engaged</i>	106
<i>Empowerment of Low-Power People by High-Power People</i>	107
<i>Metacommunication</i>	108
Summary	109

**Chapter 5 Styles and Tactics 110**

- Styles and Tactics Defined 111
- The Basic Choice: Avoid or Engage 112
- Avoidance 114
- Competition 120
  - Threats* 124
  - Verbal Aggressiveness* 126
  - Violence* 128
- Compromise 132
- Accommodation 134
- Collaboration 136
- Cautions About Styles 141
- Interaction Dynamics 143
- System Styles 147
- Flexibility Creates Constructive Conflict 149
  - Individual Adaptability* 149
  - Flexible Systems* 152
- Summary 153

**PART TWO Conflict Intervention 155**

---

**Chapter 6 Conflict Assessment 156**

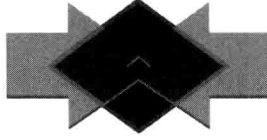
- Systems Theory: An Organizing Framework 157
- Identifying Conflict Patterns 160
  - Metaphoric/Dramatic Analysis* 160
  - Conflict Triangles* 163
  - Sculpting or Choreography* 166
  - System Rules* 167
  - Microevents* 168
  - Observation and Interviews* 172
- Quantitative Assessment 172
- Comprehensive Assessment Guides 177
  - Wehr's Conflict Map* 177
  - Wilmot-Hocker Conflict Assessment Guide* 179
- Summary 182

**Chapter 7 Negotiation 183**

- The Importance of Negotiation 183
- Developmental Ability in Negotiation 186
- Argumentation 188
- Perspectives on Negotiation 189
- Competitive Approaches 191
  - Assumptions* 191
  - Communication Patterns* 192
  - Disadvantages* 193

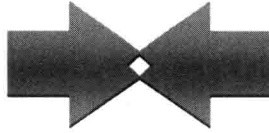
Collaborative Approaches	194
<i>Assumptions</i>	195
<i>Communication Patterns</i>	196
<i>Principled Negotiation</i>	198
<i>Disadvantages</i>	201
<i>Developing a Collaborative Framework</i>	202
The Gender Lens	203
<i>The Impact of Gender</i>	203
<i>A Transformative Approach</i>	204
Phases: From Competitive to Collaborative	206
Summary	208
 Chapter 8 Transforming Your Conflicts: Engagement in the Midrange	210
What Can Be Changed?	210
Striving for the Midrange	212
Overcoming Avoidance	213
Ending Escalation	216
<i>Nonviolent Philosophy in Interpersonal Conflict</i>	217
<i>Self-Regulation Techniques</i>	219
Choosing a Format for Interaction	228
<i>Conflict Containment Model</i>	229
<i>Family Meetings</i>	231
<i>Practical Crisis Management</i>	233
A Postscript on Further Education	234
Summary	235
 Chapter 9 Third-Party Intervention	236
The Intervention Continuum	237
When an Outsider Decides	238
<i>Adjudication</i>	238
<i>Arbitration</i>	241
<i>Forms of ADR</i>	242
Mediation: The Parties Decide	242
<i>Mediation Settings</i>	244
<i>Mediation: Agreement or Transformation?</i>	249
<i>Mediation Process and Skills</i>	250
Culture and Third Parties	252
Dispute Systems Design	253
Informal Intervention	256
Summary	259
 Appendix	260
References	263
Name Index	281
Subject Index	287

# PART ONE



## Conflict Components

# Chapter 1



## Perspectives on Conflict

Why Study Conflict?	2
Your Personal History	6
Views of Conflict	8
<i>Common Assumptions</i>	8
<i>Alternative Assumptions</i>	11
Metaphors Make a Difference	12
<i>Metaphors That Limit Conflict</i>	13
<i>Neutral Conflict Metaphors</i>	16
<i>Metaphors That Expand Conflict Potential</i>	18
<i>Mixing the Metaphors</i>	20
Framing Effects	21
<i>Culture Frames Conflict Interaction</i>	21
<i>Gender Frames Conflict Interaction</i>	25
<i>Conflict Elements Frame Conflict Interaction</i>	27
The Lens Model of Conflict	27
Summary	31

### Conflict Happens

#### Why Study Conflict?

Conflict happens. It happens on the job, between groups in our society, within families, and right in the middle of our most personal relationships. Conflict is ever present and both fascinating and maddening. The challenges of dealing with differences have rarely been greater.

Conflicts arise naturally in all kinds of settings. On the global scale, nations struggle with one another, both diplomatically and militarily. And with the increased globalization of the world's economy, we are all becoming more interdependent with one another (Brown 1992).

On the job, "conflict is a stubborn fact of organizational life" (Kolb and Putnam 1992, 311). Rather than seeing conflict as abnormal, Pondy (1992) suggests we view organiza-

tions as “arenas for staging conflicts, and managers as both fight promoters who organize bouts and as referees who regulate them” (259). Furthermore, Pondy asserts that in the company, agency, or small business, conflict may be the very essence of what the organization is about, and if “conflict isn’t happening then the organization has no reason for being.” One study surveyed workers and found that almost 85 percent reported conflicts at work (Volkema and Bergmann 1989). And with an increasing awareness of cultural diversity and gender equity issues, it is imperative that we become familiar with issues surrounding promotions and harassment. In fact, one can see training in organizations as a form of preventive conflict management (Hathaway 1995). The recognition of the prevalence of conflict at work has led to books on mediating conflict in the workplace (Yarbrough and Wilmot 1995), showing how managers can learn conflict management skills to intervene in disputes in their organization.

Ongoing, unresolved workplace conflict also has negative impacts that reach far beyond the principal parties. In an electronics plant, for example, if the director of engineering and the director of production are unable to reach agreement about quality controls, the staffs of both engineering and production actively complain about one another, subverting both groups’ goals. The continual avoidance of the problem seeps throughout the organization, affecting everyone who has direct contact with the directors. If the executive director of a nonprofit agency and her board cannot get along, employees tend to take sides, fear for their jobs, and, like those above them, wage a campaign discrediting the other group. Ignoring workplace conflict sets destructive forces in motion that decrease productivity, spread the conflict to others, and lead to lessened morale and productivity. In one organization one of us recently entered, the president and CEO was on the verge of reorganizing the structure, affecting 600 people so that two vice presidents would not have to talk to one another!

Some of the advantages to studying organizational conflicts are as follows:

- As an employee, you can learn how to get along with  
fellow employees  
your manager  
the public
- As a supervisor, you can begin to  
see conflicts coming  
learn productive responses  
get more cooperation from employees  
help employees resolve their disputes with one another  
keep interpersonal conflicts from spreading to other parts of the organization

In your personal relationships, the study of conflict also can pay big dividends. If you are an adolescent or parent of an adolescent, it will come as no surprise to you that it takes about ten years for parents and children to renegotiate roles closer to equality than their earlier parent-child relationship (Comstock 1994), and at the heart of this renegotiation is the conflict process. The study of conflict can assist in this renegotiation process, letting you see which styles backfire, which ones work best, and how much productive power you have available.

We all know that romantic relationships provide a rigorous test of our skills. Siegert and Stamp (1994) studied the effects of the “First Big Fight” in dating relationships, noting that

some couples survive and prosper, whereas others break up. These communication researchers tell us quite clearly that “the big difference between the non-survivors and survivors was the way they perceived and handled conflict” (357). As Wilmot (1995) wrote, “What determines the course of a relationship . . . is in a large measure determined by how successfully the participants move through conflict episodes” (95).

One of the ultimate testing grounds for romantic relationships is marriage. Almost all spouses report “occasional marital disagreement” (Bolger et al. 1989; Metz, Rosser, and Strapko 1994). For many spouses the disagreements may be only once or twice a month, yet for others they may continue over many days (Bolger et al. 1989). It is common and normal for partners to have conflicts or disagreements, and in fact, managing conflict is one of the central tasks of maintaining a marriage (Gottman 1994). As you might guess, learning to constructively resolve conflict is clearly and directly linked to marital satisfaction. “Findings regarding the link between conflict resolution styles and marital satisfaction have been consistent in indicating that each spouse’s marital satisfaction is positively related to the frequency with which each spouse uses constructive strategies to resolve conflict” (Kurdek 1995, 153).

It may well be that the *key skill* in all long-term committed relationships is conflict management—certainly the data on marriages suggest this is true (Gottman 1994). The presence of conflict does not determine the quality of a marriage; rather, how the couple handles conflict situations determines the quality of the relationship (Comstock and Strzyzewski 1990). Even beliefs about conflict are more important to marital happiness than whether or not the two partners actually agree with one another (Crohan 1992).

How you handle conflict spreads to other members of your family. For example, it has been noted that adult children who are taking care of their parents usually have high levels of conflict with siblings (Merrill 1996). Learning effective skills for dealing with your younger brother or sister is far better than engaging in a family dispute that will affect your children and subsequent generations as well.

We need to study conflict management because some of the findings are not intuitively obvious. For example, it isn’t just the people who call one another names who have relationship difficulties deriving from conflict. It has been clearly demonstrated that “couples who never engage in conflict are at long-term risk” (McGonagle, Kessler, and Gotlib 1993, 398).

Unresolved conflict has tremendous negative impact. It directly affects the parties themselves—the two vice presidents are so absorbed with their conflict that they cannot carry out their normal job duties. In relationships, unresolved conflict leads to drifting away from one another and sometimes jettisoning the relationship entirely. One study even found that the relapse of compulsive gamblers was related to erupting interpersonal conflicts (Lorenz 1989).

Family research is quite clear about the systemwide effects of destructive marital conflict. First, negative conflict between the parents reduces the family’s network of friends and creates more loneliness (Jones 1992). Second, conflict between the parents tends to both change the mood of household interactions and also to shift the parents’ attention to the negative behaviors of their children (Jouriles and Farris 1992). For example, interparental conflict leads to fathers issuing confusing and threatening commands to their sons (Jouriles and Farris 1992). Third, parental conflict has direct negative impacts on the children (Comstock and Strzyzewski 1990). Conflict between parents predicts well-being of