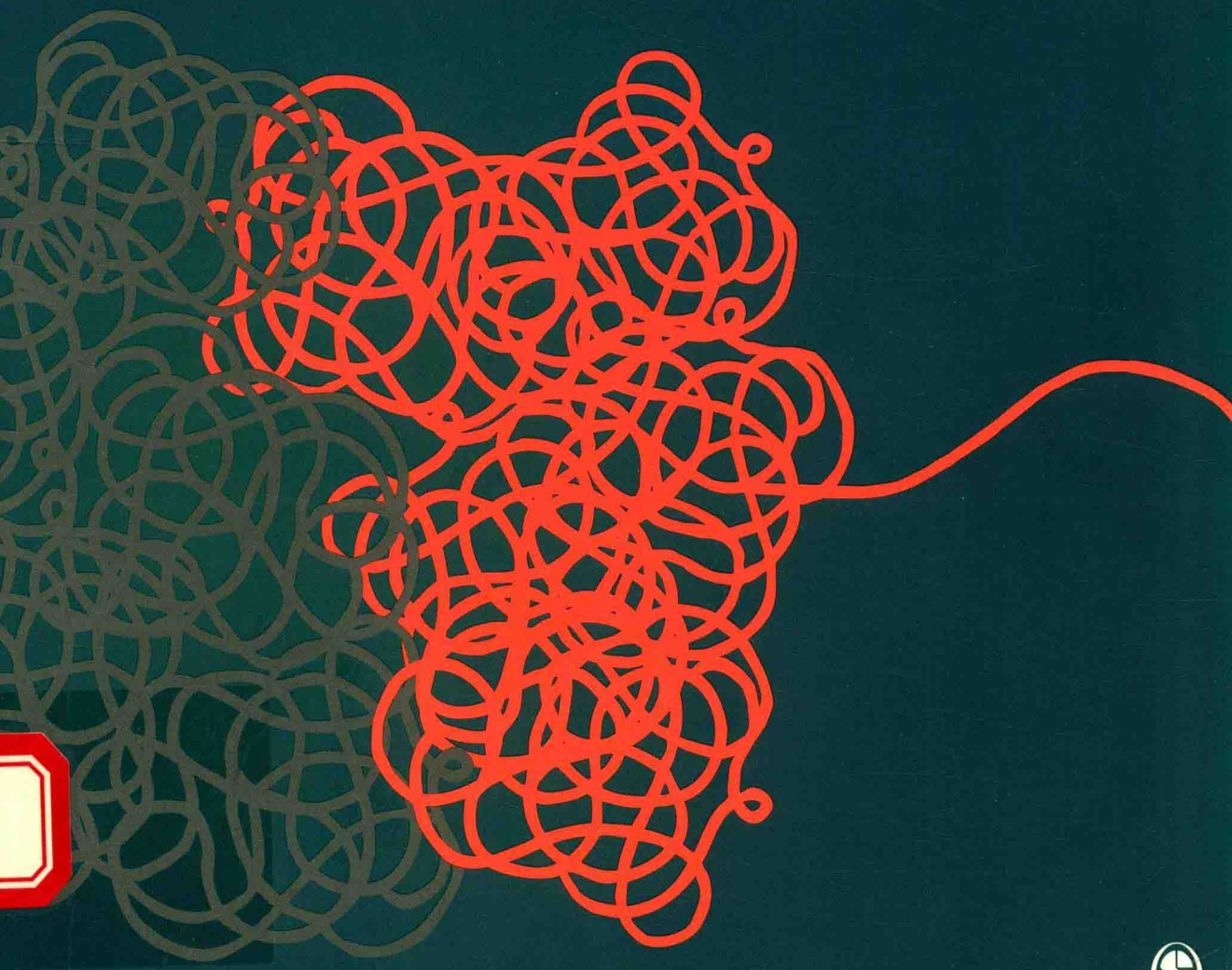
# conflict & communication

FRED E. JANDT



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# Conflict and Communication

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Fred E. Jandt** was one of the first communication scholars to study conflict. In 1973, his edited volume *Conflict Resolution Through Communication* (Harper & Row) introduced the discipline to conflict studies from outside the field. He was one of the invited participants at the conference sponsored by the Research Board of the Speech Communication Association, which debated the directions for future conflict studies and produced the book *Perspectives on Communication in Social Conflict* (Prentice Hall).

In later years, he conducted the seminar *Managing Conflict Productively* for corporate and government agency professionals throughout the United States. That seminar led to the 1985 publication of his popular book *Win-Win Negotiating: Turning Conflict Into Agreement* (Wiley), which has been translated into eight languages and continues to be used today.

In the 1990s, he partnered with the noted multicultural counseling scholar Paul B. Pedersen to plan and host a conference of mediators from the Asia-Pacific region held in Penang, Malaysia. From that conference, he and Paul edited the volume *Constructive Conflict Management: Asia-Pacific Cases* (SAGE, 1996).

Fred uses his life experiences in his work as a professional mediator. He continues to train volunteers learning to become mediators in the California justice system.

He began his professional career at The College at Brockport, State University of New York, after receiving his PhD from Bowling Green State University.

# PREFACE

Why should we study conflict as part of a communication curriculum? As you read this book, you'll see that communication and conflict is a dynamic and engaging field of study with direct relevance to our daily lives.

Drawing on my many years as both an academic researcher of conflict and a professional conflict negotiator and mediator, I've approached the study of conflict with two overarching main ideas: Conflict is inevitable, and conflict is experienced and managed through communication.

First, conflict is a fact of life, and something that we don't need to strive to avoid at all costs. We have all experienced conflict to some degree and frequency, and at least some of those conflicts were probably stressful. Simply put, if we live and work with other people, conflict is inevitable. At one time, it was popularly believed that all conflicts were destructive and should be avoided. We now understand that, in fact, conflicts can be very productive in many instances. A simple personal conflict with a romantic partner such as an argument about whether or not to go out to dinner every weekend night can help resolve opposing views about personal finances. Or, a professional conflict between colleagues around missed deadlines could help to establish a shared set of priorities at work. Conflict occurs in all components of our lives, and therefore we'll cover a broad range of interpersonal and organizational conflicts throughout this text.

Second, communication plays a central role in conflict. As reflected in the contemporary academic study of conflict, we engage in conflict though communication, and we use communication skills to manage conflict. You'll note that I've used the word *manage* rather than *resolve*. The emphasis of this book is not on putting a final end to a conflict, as *resolve* would suggest, because that outcome isn't always possible or desirable. Instead, this book focuses on using communication skills to manage or influence ongoing conflict in order to minimize negative outcomes and promote positive outcomes.

## GOAL AND PEDAGOGY

The general goal of this textbook is to help you develop the skills to analyze conflicts and to manage conflicts productively.

In Chapter 1, you will explore the definition of conflict and its academic study. In Chapter 2, you'll examine the concept of power, an important element of interpersonal relationships and conflicts, as well as several different styles of dealing with conflict. In Chapter 3, you will learn how to analyze a conflict in order to accurately describe a conflict, assist the parties if possible, and apply the lessons drawn from one conflict's outcomes to future conflicts. In Chapter 4, you'll learn about the effect of culture on conflict and develop improved skills for dealing with intercultural conflicts. In Chapter 5, you'll learn how to improve your negotiating skills. Anger, aggression, and bullying can lead to destructive conflicts—and

in Chapter 6, you'll learn skills for dealing with these challenges. Chapters 7 and 8 introduce mediation skills—both face-to-face and online—followed by Chapter 9 with a focus on apologies, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Finally, Chapter 10 applies what you have learned in previous chapters to explore conflict in families and organizations.

**Learning Objectives** are presented at the start of every chapter to help you focus your attention on the most significant concepts and skills introduced in each chapter. Boldface **key terms** and a **glossary** help highlight and deepen your understanding of important terminology as you advance through the text.

In each chapter, you will find multiple boxed **Case Studies** drawn from a wide range of interpersonal and organizational contexts that will give you an opportunity to analyze conflicts at various stages and to apply conflict management skills to those scenarios. These Case Studies are paired with critical thinking questions to guide discussion around specific conflict management skills and applications. At the end of each chapter, you will also find **Discussion Questions** to encourage you to review and deepen your understanding of the important concepts and skills introduced in the chapter. For additional instructor resources, visit the companion site at **study.sagepub.com/jandtconflict**.

I hope that you will find new ideas and new skills in this book that will help you see conflict and communication in new ways, and that you will continue to use your new understanding of conflict management to enrich your personal life and career.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to acknowledge two scholars early in my career for introducing me to conflict studies—interpersonal communication and peace scholar John "Sam" Keltner and my dissertation adviser at Bowling Green State University Delmar M. Hilyard.

My colleagues have stimulated my thinking about communication and conflict. I want to particularly acknowledge Professors Joseph DeVito and Thomas J. Knutson.

My association with many professional mediators continues to stimulate my thinking. I particularly want to acknowledge Dana Crawford King, former program manager of the Dispute Resolution Center in Riverside, California, and former board member of the National Association for Community Mediation; Judy Brannen, independent mediator and REDRESS® mediator; Susan Nauss Exon, associate dean for faculty development and professor of law at the University of La Verne College of Law; and John Winslade, professor of counseling and guidance, California State University, San Bernardino.

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# 1

# CONFLICT IN OUR LIVES


Popular Attitudes About Conflict
- *Myths About Conflict*
- *Childhood Learning About Conflict*

The Academic Study of Conflict
- *Conflict Defined*
- *The Inevitability of Conflict*
- *Conflict Resolution or Conflict Management?*
- *Constructive and Destructive Conflict*

Learning New Conflict Management Skills

Listening and Empathy
- *Listening Skills for Conflict Management*
- *Facilitating Others' Listening*


## Learning Objectives

After studying this chapter, you will be able to:

1. Describe popular attitudes and myths about conflict
2. Define conflict
3. Identify conflict management skills
4. Apply listening skills to conflict management

In this first chapter, you are challenged to examine your beliefs and early learning about conflict. Some of those beliefs and attitudes may negatively affect your interactions with others today. You'll then learn a new definition for conflict reflecting the reality that it not only is inevitable but also can be productive. With that beginning perspective, you'll be able to learn new skills for conflict management using this text. In this chapter, you'll learn the role listening plays in conflict management.

## POPULAR ATTITUDES ABOUT CONFLICT

Take a minute before reading this chapter to make a list of the words that come to your mind when you think about conflict. Then mark which ones are positive and which are negative.

For many years, I conducted management training programs in conflict and negotiation for corporate, nonprofit, and government executives across the country. If your list is like theirs, you probably have many more negative associations with conflict than you have positive ones. If your list is like theirs, you included words like *argue*, *hostility*, *disagreement*, *draining*, *fight*, *stressful*, *upsetting*, and *anxiety*. What is the significance of associating conflict with unpleasant feelings? Those feelings may influence the way we act in conflict situations. If we feel conflict is unpleasant, we may tend to avoid dealing with it.

And yet, right now, you're holding in your hand a book about conflict. Why would you want to learn more about unpleasant things? Like a few executives in those management training programs, you may have some positive words on your list. In those programs, one or two people in the room would tentatively raise their hands to suggest some positive words—words such as *creativity*, *energizing*, *progress*, *opportunity*, and *growth*. Now challenged, others would begin to suggest ways that conflict is positive. Usually, someone would recognize that it is through conflict that change occurs. Unless objections are voiced, things don't change. Conflict can lead to social change such as the end of segregation or the fight for women's rights. The points to be made are that conflict can be productive and that, if we can accept this possibility, we may be more willing to deal with conflict when it occurs.

Now go back to your list and identify the context you had in mind when you wrote each word. For example, if you wrote the word *argue*, were you thinking of conflicts in your family or your workplace? You might use the general contexts of interpersonal, organizational, community, and intercultural/international. It is these four contexts to which conflict communication theories and principles have been applied (Oetzel, Ting-Toomey, & Anderson, 2013). You might see that the words on your list could apply to all four contexts. This illustrates that conflict can be studied exclusively in one context (i.e., interpersonal conflicts) or using a multicontext approach, which can lead to conclusions such as that "it is through conflict that change occurs." You will find that this is a textbook about conflict in all of these contexts. At times, you'll focus on one particular context, such as conflict in families or community conflict resolution centers. But as our lives take place in all of these contexts, you'll also develop a transcontext understanding of conflict. That executive in the training program who saw that conflict can lead to change in organizations (organizational context) could also see that conflict can lead to social change (community context) and could then conclude that "it is through conflict that change occurs" (transcontext).

## Myths About Conflict

That many people at first have negative associations with conflict demonstrates a myth about conflict—that is, that conflict is always bad. In fact, as you saw above, conflict can be positive.

There are other myths that affect the way we deal with conflicts:

*Myth:* Harmony is normal; conflict is abnormal.

*Reality:* Conflicts are inevitable, and conflicts in relationships are as normal as is harmony. Conflict is a universal feature of human groups. Wherever there are scarce resources, divided functions in society,

different levels of power, or competition for a limited supply of goods, status, valued roles, or power, conflict can occur (Augsburger, 1992). Both conflict and harmony, not one or the other, are normal in a single relationship.

*Myth:* Conflicts are communication breakdowns. If people communicated better, there would be no conflicts.

*Reality:* I hear this myth more than any other. I ask people to consider this: Sometimes, with more communication, it becomes increasingly clear that the conflict is very real and very important. More communication simply helps the parties to see that they are very much in disagreement.

*Myth:* Conflicts destroy relationships.

*Reality:* Unresolved conflict can destroy a relationship. Conflicts that are confronted by both parties to work toward a resolution can, in fact, strengthen the relationship.

*Myth:* Productive work teams don't have conflicts.

*Reality:* If experience has shown us anything, it is that work teams that strive to avoid conflict can experience disasters. It is in work teams where conflict is openly expressed and addressed that productivity is highest.

*Myth:* The best way to resolve conflicts is simply to compromise.

*Reality:* Compromise is one way to resolve conflicts, but there is a more productive way. It does, however, require more effort from the disputing parties. In Chapter 5, for example, you'll read about collaboration as a way to resolve conflicts in ways that both parties win.

*Myth:* Conflicts are conflicts worldwide, as are the ways to resolve them.

*Reality:* Conflicts occur in all cultures, but how they are expressed and how they are resolved vary greatly. How do we know when a conflict is over? Some cultures tend to view conflict in terms of a final resolution while, for others, the concept of conflict resolution may not be meaningful as conflict is understood as part of an ongoing process that continues as long as the relationship exists.

*Myth:* In families, as long as the children don't see their parents fight, they are not affected by conflict.

*Reality:* Families are a system made up of parts. If one part of the system is having difficulties, the difficulties affect every other part.

These are only some myths about conflict. What is the significance of there being so many myths about conflict and that so many of these are negative? Just as having negative associations with conflict influences how we behave in conflict situations, these negative popular myths demonstrate that conflict and conflict resolution are not well understood.



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