

Instructor’s Manual
Activities and Discussion Questions
Chapter 1
The Nature of Conflict

What Is Conflict Anyway?

1. Ask students to write a paragraph on their perception of conflict. Then, have them get into pairs and exchange their paragraphs. If most of the students’ perceptions of conflict are “too nice,” ask them to think of someone they know who engages in conflict and request them to write about that person’s perception of conflict. (You can have students pair up more than once if time permits.)
2. Give a mini-lecture on the definition and the various elements of conflict.
3. Distribute the worksheet titled “Elements of Conflict” to each student in the class. Ask the students to fill out the worksheet with their own conflicts and their partner’s conflicts.

The Elements of Conflict Worksheet

The Elements of Conflict	My Perspective	Conflict Partner’s Perspective
Expressed Struggle		
Interdependence		

Perceived Incompatible Goals		
Perceived Scarce Resources		
Perception of Interference		

4. After each pair of students has completed the worksheet, bring the class back together for a discussion. Have the students reflect on what they discovered about their perception of conflict.
5. Discuss the two types of spirals: escalatory spirals and avoidance spirals. Ask students to contrast between the two. Which type of spiral is the worst? Why? What can people do to stop themselves from ascending these spirals?
6. Have the students pair up with their partners, and ask each pair of students to help each other recognize the spirals occurring in the conflicts they analyzed in their worksheets.
7. Finish the chapter with a discussion on the dangers and opportunities arising from conflict.

Elements of Conflict in “Action”

Movie Analysis

The Family Stone

Note to instructors: The following activities accompany a viewing of the movie *The Family Stone*. Since students have only read the first chapter at this point, the movie works well for identifying the “elements of conflict.” However, as the term progresses, you could revisit the film and its concepts or characters numerous times, because it exemplifies topics such as power, emotions, systems, and interpersonal negotiation. Finally, you could show clips from the movie to discuss the concepts presented in Chapter 1 as well as the concepts from later chapters. At the

end of the semester, you could show the students the entire movie, and then have them perform an in-depth conflict analysis of all the conflicts that took place in the movie.

Discussion Questions (Chapter 1)

Note to instructors: Using the “Elements of Conflict” worksheet helps a lot.

1. Identify the expressed struggles between Everett and his family.
 - a. What do you see as the perceived incompatible goals and the perceived scarce resources of the conflict?
 - b. What interference do you see between the parties of conflict?
2. Identify the expressed struggles between Meredith’s and Everett’s families.
 - a. What do you see as the perceived incompatible goals and the perceived scarce resources of the conflict?
 - b. What interference do you see between or among the parties of conflict?
3. What expressed struggles do Everett and Meredith experience with each other?
4. How are the parties of conflict interdependent on each other? (You could ask this question with regard to the whole family or just Meredith and Everett.)
5. Choose any other set of characters that appear to have a conflict in the movie, and analyze the various elements of conflict that you see between them.

Note to instructors: One way to complete this set of discussion questions is to either ask the students these questions ahead of time, after showing them clips from the movie, or after showing them the entire film. Another fun way to complete the discussion questions (and to demonstrate the differences in people’s perceptions) is to give half of the questions that pertain to Everett to half of the class and the remaining questions that pertain to Everett’s conflict partner to the other half of the class. In other words, the primary objective of performing this activity is to have half of the class view the conflict from one party’s perception while the other half of the class views the conflict from the other party’s perception. After all the students have answered the questions assigned to them, you can ask them to share their perceptions of the conflict between the two parties. The differences or similarities in the students’ perceptions will make for a great class discussion.

Conflict Skills Inventory

Part One

1. In class, create a list of all the things that you think are your strengths when you manage your conflicts with others. What are the conflict management skills that you have?
2. Next, create a list of all the things that you think are your weaknesses when you manage your conflicts with others. What conflict management skills do you need to get better at managing your conflicts?

3. Ask the three most important people in your life (such as a friend, a coworker, a parent, a sibling, or a romantic partner) to assess your strengths and weaknesses when managing a conflict. Do not give them the list of your strengths and weaknesses when managing a conflict.
4. Compare your list with the lists of the three most important people in your life.
5. Prepare a plan for improvement, which includes steps to make you better at managing conflicts and also includes feedback from the three most important people in your life. Set three to five goals for yourself to improve upon over the duration of this course.
6. By incorporating ideas from Chapter 1, discuss how you and those around you might benefit from your improved conflict management skills.

Part Two (Optional)

1. At the end of the term, repeat all the steps listed in Part One. Notice all the areas in which you have improved and the skills that you still need to work on. When writing your plan for improvement, think of your conflict management goals for the period ranging from the next six months to one year.
2. As you complete this course on interpersonal conflict, reflect on the major factors that have contributed to your increased conflict-management skills. Conversely, reflect on whether or not you have regressed in any of your skills or abilities. Then, talk about why you think that you have regressed in these skills or abilities and what, if anything, you'd like to do differently.

Preventing Destructive Conflict at Work Process

1. Ask students to read the scenario and the sample dialogue given below.
2. Assign students to groups of three to four members each. Have each group read the sample dialogue and answer the discussion questions that follow. Then, have each group choose a scribe to write down all of its members' reflections. Have a student from each group (other than the scribe) report their group's observations to the rest of the class.
3. When students reconvene together as a class to listen to the observations of all the groups, look for themes, similarities, differences, and a few takeaways—snippets of learning that students can use to help prevent and manage their interpersonal conflicts.

Sample Dialogue

Situation: Vicki is an employee in a small training company. Her boss, Maria, has been frustrated with Vicki's lack of initiative, inability to prioritize her workload, and lack of interpersonal skills. Vicki is frustrated with Maria because she thinks her boss expects too much from her and the pace of the work is much too fast for a small company. Vicki has been taking a lot of sick days lately and is often not following through with small assignments. The following conversation is just one of many small conflicts that have been going on for approximately six months now. Read the dialogue given below, and then, answer the discussion questions that follow.

Maria: Hey, Vicki. I was wondering where you put that file for the Spring Conference next week.

Vicki: Which one? You give me a lot of files.

Maria: The really big blue one with our logo on the front.

Vicki: That's the one you said you'd follow up on. I just assumed you did.

Maria: No, I remember very distinctly from our debriefing session that you said you wanted to do it because you had worked with Ed on last year's conference. We all took different assignments, and that's the one you took.

Vicki: I definitely took a lot of assignments, but the Spring Conference folder wasn't one of them.

Maria: Okay . . . I guess what we really need to do is not figure out who lost it, but where the file is now.

Hocker: Interpersonal Conflict, 2025 Release

Vicki: Who “lost” it? It was never mine, so how could I lose it? I’m sick of always being blamed for everything that goes wrong around here. If everyone would just sit still for a minute, maybe all this stuff wouldn’t fall through the cracks.

Maria: Wait a second. I wasn’t blaming you for anything! I just really need to find the folder. I’m wondering where it is, and I need to write the follow-up evaluations.

Vicki: Well, I don’t have it. (Vicki returns to completing her time sheet on the computer.)

(Maria retreats to her office and doesn’t say what’s really on her mind. She’s trying not to get too angry. She meets with another colleague later that afternoon and asks the colleague what their thoughts are about Vicki as their support staff.)

Discussion Questions

- Do you think that this conflict between Vicki and Maria could have been prevented?
- Should Vicki and Maria just drop the conflict and not discuss it at all?
- What do you think Maria and Vicki could do to prevent more of this potentially time-wasting and destructive conflict?
- If you were to write the story of this conflict as a third-person observing the conflict, what would it be?
- What advice would you give to Vicki and Maria?
- Do you think that there is any hope for this conflict and a working relationship between Vicki and Maria? Explain.
- Is avoidance of conflict the same as prevention of conflict?
- The text discusses several benefits of learning conflict management, including success in the workplace. What skills do you think that Maria and Vicki need to learn to get better at managing their conflicts?

Journaling Ideas

1. Write about a time when you “read” someone else’s mind. How did it turn out? How would dialogue have helped or hindered the situation? Write about a time when someone else “read” your mind. How did it turn out? How might dialogue have helped or hindered the situation?
2. Write about your bad habits or dirty tricks. How have these played a role in the way you manage your conflict with others?
3. Recall a recent or current conflict that mattered or still matters to you. How do you feel when you think about it? Describe your physical symptoms, if you have any, as well as your thought processes on the conflict. How do these feelings or thoughts affect the way

that you manage the conflict?

(You could ask students to do this activity for more than one conflict or repeat it later in the semester to see what, if anything, may be different or similar in their approaches to managing conflicts.)