Chapter 1

Introduction to the Study of Conflict

From your authors:  
  
Our goal in this first chapter is to introduce you to the study of interpersonal conflict.  Conflict is a problematic situation that occurs between interdependent people who seek different goals or means to those goals.  Two additional characteristics of conflict are that the perceived differences have the potential to adversely affect the relationship if not addressed and that there is a sense or urgency about the need to resolve differences.  Our definition broadens the study of conflict because nonverbal messages can adversely affect relationships as much as verbal ones like arguing and bickering.  Problematic situations that are examples of conflicts include avoiding the other person or topic and glaring at the other person or giving the other a "silent treatment".  
  
Although many people may not admit it, most people encounter conflict quite frequently.  Conflict is inevitable - as relationships become closer, more person, and more interdependent, more conflicts occur, trivial (minor) complaints become more significant, and feelings become more intense.  Conflict hold a kind of dread for us - because we know we have often mishandled it in the past.  This negative view of conflict may lead us to avoid improving situations and interpersonal relationships; thus, we urge our students to adopt a more positive view of conflict.   
  
The rise of violence in interpersonal relationships makes interpersonal conflict management an essential social skill.  Although conflict is inevitable, interpersonal violence is not because other options are usually available.  We always have choices (or options) in conflict situations, and we are all responsible for our own actions.  
  
Conflict management is the communication behavior we employ based on our analysis of a conflict situation.  In addition, a productive view of conflict situations includes flexibility and the belief that all conflicting parties can achieve their important goals.  We may not realize it at the time, but constructive responses to conflict situations are inherent in (all) most conflict situations.  When action is called for, there are appropriate actions that can produce positive, constructive, and favorable outcomes.  
  
Finally, we need to recognize that communication is not simply saying what's on one's mind.  Communication (and, by extension, conflict) isn't something we do to the other person, but something we do with one another (like teamwork or like a dance).  We communicate in conflict situations by stopping, thinking, and listening before communicating.    
  
The advantage of the transactional model is that we recognize the importance of both people's behavior in the conflict situation.  One person acting competently in a conflict situation and using good communication skills usually cannot bring the conflict to a resolution.  It takes two people to make the conflict, and it takes two people to manage or resolve it.  By taking both parties' behavior into consideration, we can better determine what communication option we should exercise in a given conflict situation.  We can respond by avoiding the conflict, sitting down and discussing it with the other person, or reacting with aggressive speech or violent behavior.  The best of these options is communicating about the conflict.