Chapter 6

Managing the Conflict Climate

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the role played by climate in conflict situation.  Abuse of power, competition, distrust, and defensive behavior create a hostile, dangerous, and harmful conflict environment that produces unsatisfactory outcomes for one or both parties.  Unabusive power or equality, cooperation, trust, and supportive behavior create a warm, friendly, and nurturing conflict environment that is more likely to produce mutually satisfactory outcomes.

Abusive power contributes to a harmful conflict climate because it is perceived as threatening.  The more powerful person in the conflict situation has greater latitude in using power in abusive and unabusive ways.  Those who abuse power may find that the other person responds in passive or passive-aggressive ways in order to avoid threats and abuse.  Although it is difficult to embrace the idea of giving up power, something doing so is one's best option in resolving conflict.  At the very least, deemphasizing power differences leads to a nurturing conflict climate.  Those with less power in the situation should also seek opportunities to be more assertive, use power-neutral language, and take responsibility for the outcomes in the conflict situation.

Competition becomes part of a harmful conflict climate when the parties view the conflict situation only in terms of win-lose outcomes.  This perception results in the conflicting parties seeing themselves as individuals who must win at all costs.  By shifting to a conflict in terms of win-win outcomes, the conflicting parties can view themselves as partners, where maintaining and preserving the relationship is as important, if not more, than winning an argument or forcing one's decision on another.

Both distrust and unhealthy trust are threatening to an interpersonal relationship when they contribute to a harmful conflict climate.  Some people distrust others too much and some are too trusting. Earned trust contributes to a nurturing conflict climate.  People maintain the trust of others when they continue to act in cooperative ways, avoid suspicious activity, and reciprocate in trusting ways to the action of the other.

Critical to our success in conflict situations is the use of communicative behavior that is supportive and nonthreatening.  Conflicting parties should try to establish a nurturing conflict climate by being supportive and not being defensive.  The most significant steps toward creating supportive climate are found in communication that describes behavior rather than judges it, that is oriented toward solving problems rather than assigning blame, that focuses on description and problem solution rather than "you-orientation", that manifests an attitude of empathy rather than an attitude that is neutral and unconcerned, and that conveys a sense of equality with the other rather than a position of superiority.  Finally, a supportive climate is created spontaneously rather than through behavior perceived as strategic an through talk that suggests that the conversation is still in progress rather than certain and final.

The concept of defensive behavior differs from that of power imbalance.  While a few defensive behaviors are sometimes associated with people in positions of power, such as evaluation (criticizing), control (being dominating), neutrality (lacking interesting in subordinates problems), and superiority ("pulling rank"), defensive behaviors may appear irrespective of power.  They are more consistently associated with feelings of inadequacy, insecurity, fear, or uncertainty that make one turn defensive in a threatening situation.  When powerful people manifest defensive behaviors, it is an indication of feelings of insecurity about their role as supervisor, leader, or parent.

Communicators who create nurturing climates are more likely to create mutually satisfying outcomes because they participate in the decisions, agreements, solutions, and resolution of conflicts that affect them.  If we feel safe enough to assert our interests, needs, and goals; listen to others; and collaborate in interpersonal conflict, we are more likely to achieve mutually satisfying outcomes.

Chapter Objectives

At the end of the chapter, you should be able to:

1). Describe the role that climate generally plays in conflict situations.

2). Describe specifically the role played by an imbalance of power in a conflict situation and explain how to equalize power.

3). Describe specifically the role played by competition in a conflict situation and explain how to encourage cooperation.

4). Describe specifically the role played by distrust in a conflict situation and explain how to create trust.

5). Describe specifically the role played by defensive behaviors in a conflict situation and explain how to engage and encourage supportive behaviors.

6). Explain how the concept of defensive behaviors differs from that of power imbalance.

7). Explain how groupthink leads to mismanaged conflict

-Abigail, R.A., & Cahn, D.D., (2011)

**Chapter Outline**

**[Objective #1: Describe the role that climate generally plays in conflict situations.]**

I. What is Climate?

A. Climate is a set of expectations for our behavior, revealed by our perceptions of the emotional tone of voices, the looks on people’s faces, their body movements, dress code, room décor, and the occasion

B. Conflict climate refers to the psychological atmosphere impacting a conflict including these bi-polar concepts: imbalance of power versus equity, distrust versus trust, and defensive versus supportive behavior

C. Harmful conflict climate consists of an imbalance of power, distrust, and defensiveness, which fosters accommodation (chilling effect) or competition (meeting force with force)

D. Nurturing conflict climate consists of openness, assertiveness, and cooperation

**[Objective #2: Describe specifically the role played by an imbalance of power in a**

**conflict situation and explain how to equalize power. ]**

II. The Threat of Power Abuse

A. Understanding Power

1. Power is the ability to influence or control events

2. Power contributes to a harmful conflict climate when it is perceived as threatening. When this occurs, we call it power abuse

B. Behaviors that increase/decrease the potential for power abuse

1. Threats are statements that link the other person’s noncompliance with negative outcomes

2. Thromise—a message that sounds like a promise (i.e., if you do x you will receive y) but operates like a threat because there is a penalty associated with noncompliance that may hurt the recipient

3. Powerful speech refers to verbal and nonverbal messages used to dominate and control others

4. Powerless speech is talking up to others; making requests or asking questions (showing that one is in need or is uninformed); speaking softly; and sounding tentative, uncertain, or unsure of oneself

5. Neutral speech, she or he does not talk down or talk up to the others but talks to them as equals and relies on objective language

C. Sharing Power

1. Give up some of the more obvious power resources and symbols of authority

2. Make power resources accessible to everyone in the group

3. The one with the least interest in a relationship can increase his or her level of interest

4. The powerful or dominating person can give power to the relationship that exists between the friends, romantic partners, or workplace members by acknowledging their relationship, making commitments to it, and taking it into consideration as they behave

**[Objective #3: Describe specifically the role played by competition in a conflict**

**situation and explain how to encourage cooperation. ]**

III. The Threat of Competition

A. Competition occurs when the parties are positioned against each other, emphasis is placed on winning, and outcomes are framed as win–lose

B. Cooperation is a situation in which we place greater emphasis on the quality of an interpersonal relationship than on the outcome

**[Objective #4: Describe specifically the role played by distrust in a conflict situation**

**and explain how to create trust.]**

IV. The Threat of Distrust

A. Trust is the belief that another is benevolent or honest toward the trusting individual, and that the other person’s caring transcends any direct benefits the other receives as a result of caring

B. Distrust means we lack confidence in another person, we do not rely on that person, and/or we are suspicious or wary of her or him

C. Unhealthy trust results in gullibility. It is typically inflexible, rigid, and consistent in actions toward others, without regard for the situation. Those who trust pathologically have a tendency to confuse risk-taking and trusting situations, overestimating the probability of getting what they want or underestimating the negative consequences of not getting what they want

D. Healthy trust is earned

E. Ways to build trust

1. Begin by trusting others

2. Perform cooperative actions

3. Avoid suspicious activity

4. Reciprocate in trusting ways

E. Prisoner’s Dilemma (PD) is a means of demonstrating mixed motive situations and the need for trust

**[Objective #5: Describe specifically the role played by defensive behaviors in a conflict**

**situation and explain how to engage and encourage supportive behaviors.]**

V. The Threat of Defensive Behavior

A. Defensive behaviors are messages that create uncertain, anxiety, and or confusion for the other person.

B. Supportive behaviors are messages that put the other person more at ease.

C. Defensive and supportive behaviors are contrasts

1. An evaluation consists of praise and blame, while a nonjudgmental description is worded in a way that does not threaten the other’s self-esteem.

2. Control refers to attempts to dominate another’s behavior, whereas a problem orientation is a focus on the issue rather than preserve one’ power over another.

3. Strategy suggests motives and agendas, spontaneity is straightforward, unplanned, and captures the spirit of the moment.

4. Neutrality refers to a lack of concern for the welfare of others (i.e., “that is not my problem”), while empathy involves taking an interest in others.

5. Superiority means “pulling rank” on others, versus equality, which expresses a desire to cooperate and invites participation.

6. Certainty appears dogmatic because it refers to statements that consist of “all” or “every,” such as “you always do that to me” or “everybody does it,” while

provisionalism suggests tentativeness, a desire to withhold one’s judgment until all the facts are in.

**[Objective #6: Explain how the concept of defensive behavior differs from that of**

**power imbalance.] See the text for the difference between these two concepts.**

**[Objective #7: Explain how groupthink leads to mismanaged conflict. ]**

VI. The threat of Groupthink.

A. The “Abilene Paradox” results from mismanaged agreement. That is, while people believe themselves to be in disagreement with others over the decision being made, they in fact do agree with others that the decision is wrong, but no one has voiced that opinion.

B. The Lucifer Effect is applied to situations where groups come to commit great harms due to the release of situational constraints that would otherwise keep them from behaving in such manner.