

Managing Intercultural Conflict Competently

Ting-Toomey, S., & Oetzel, J. (2001). *Managing intercultural conflict effectively*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

Ting-Toomey and Oetzel (2001) advance a culture-based situational model that they use throughout the book to explain the multifaceted nature of intercultural conflict situations. Borrowing from previous intercultural research on cultural values (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988; Hofstede, 1991; Ting-Toomey, 1999; Triandis, 1995a), they discuss various elements of intercultural conflict and how individualists (independent selves) and collectivists (interdependent selves) and members of small and large power distance cultures deal with them.

Ting-Toomey and Oetzel (2001) in the final chapter of their book highlight practical and constructive intercultural conflict competence skills that can be used to manage “everyday culture-based intimate conflicts, group conflicts, and organizational conflicts” (p. 173). The authors assert that for one to enact ideal conflict competence, he/she must acquire three things—in-depth knowledge, heightened mindfulness, and constructive conflict skills—and be able to apply them in an ethical manner in various intercultural contexts.

Knowledge Dimension

- ❖ Knowledge according to Ting-Toomey and Oetzel (2001) refers to “developing an in-depth understanding of important intercultural communication concepts that can help to manage culture-based conflict competently” (p. 174).
- ❖ Culture-sensitive knowledge enables disputants in an intercultural conflict to uncover their inherent ethnocentric lenses, and to be able to form an accurate perspective of and reframe a conflict situation from the other’s culture standpoint.
- ❖ It is important to understand situational features, such as ethnocentrism and prejudice, and perceived goal-salient issues because these affect how different cultural members handle a conflict.
Cultural values and conflict outcomes: Generally, individualists are concerned with conflict problem solving and closure while collectivists are concerned with facework process management issues.
Power distance cultures and conflict outcomes: In small power distance cultures, individuals should learn to employ self-empowering moves and use assertive techniques to manage the conflict constructively. In large power distance cultures, individuals should learn to use their personal and social networks appropriately to manage the conflict productively.

Mindfulness Dimension

- ❖ Mindfulness means attending to one’s internal assumptions, cognitions, and emotions and, at the same time, becoming attuned to the other’s conflict assumptions, cognitions, and emotions (Ting-Toomey, 1999).
- ❖ Mindful reflexivity includes being aware of the cultural and personal assumptions we bring to a conflict situation. In addition, being mindful involves understanding intercultural differences and viewing unfamiliar behavior that we encounter from a nonjudgmental perspective.
- ❖ Though it is not easy to pay attention to and understand multiple cultural-level and situational-level factors at play in an escalating conflict episode, it is imperative that we do so. This means that we integrate new ideas and/or expand our variety of perspectives. The end result could be personal, relational, familial, and organization development.
- ❖ One other thing we should practice in mindfulness is analytical empathy. Analytical empathy is a systematic way of repositioning ourselves to see and to experience conflict events from the other conflict party’s view and to gain alternative insights in approaching the problem (Rothman, 1997).
- ❖ Practicing a conflict perspective that is mindful fosters collaborative dialogue and collaborative listening.

Constructive Conflict Skills Dimension

This refers to our operational abilities to manage an intercultural conflict situation appropriately, effectively, satisfactorily, and productively. Constructive conflict communicators use culture-sensitive interaction skills to manage the process of conflict adaptively and reach important goals for all parties amicably.

Ting-Toomey and Oetzel (2001) put forth the following ten core constructive conflict skills that are critical in any intercultural conflict situation:

- I. *Mindful observation:* involves an O-D-I-S analysis; we learn to *observe* attentively the verbal and nonverbal signals in the conflict process; we should then *describe* mentally and in behaviorally specific

- terms what is going on in the conflict interaction; next, we should generate *multiple interpretations* to make sense of the behavior we are observing and describing; finally, we may decide to respect the differences and *suspend* our ethnocentric evaluation.
- II. *Mindful listening*: In a conflict negotiation process, new information crucial to the interaction is acquired and this means that both conflict parties need to learn to listen mindfully to each other even when disagreeing. The disputants need to listen with focused attentiveness to the cultural and personal assumptions being expressed and shift their conflict perspective to reflect things from the other conflict partner's perspective.
 - III. *Mindful reframing*: means creating alternative contexts to frame your understanding of the conflict behavior, largely because creating this new context to understand the conflict behavior may redefine your interpretation and reaction to the behavior or conflict event.
 - IV. *Identity validation*: this occurs when we a) address people by their desired titles, labels, names and identities; b) use inclusive language and situational language that encompasses both ingroup and outgroup members; and c) resist privileged discourse which we do when we forge an assumption of difference, recognizing multiple discourses and interpretations of reality, resisting dominant-group views, and challenging stereotypical and dominant views.
 - V. *Facework management*: involves preserving or protecting our own communication identity during a conflict episode while concurrently dealing with the communication identity of the other conflict party, and in the process validating the conflict party's social self-esteem and social self-worth issues. This can be encapsulated by the concept of giving face which means not humiliating others, especially one's conflict opponents, in public.
 - VI. *Productive power balancing*: depending on the relationship of the parties in a conflict episode, and the extent to which one is dependent on the other for goal attainment of any kind, there could be a power differential. Using power positively will involve choosing a partnership power perspective, and both sides genuinely listening to the other side's concerns, needs, expectations, and wishes.
 - VII. *Collaborative dialogue*: attempt to discover common ground, share power productively, and assume that each cultural team has a piece of the bigger picture. The skills of mindful observation, listening, and reframing are crucial to constructing the collaborative dialogue process.
 - VIII. *Problem-solving skills*: involve using a particular problem-solving sequence to attempt to resolve the problem. In the *differentiation* phase, both cultural teams clarify the contrasting conflict positions and goals, and pursue the underlying reasons that underscore the positional differences; the *mutual problem description phase* includes both conflict parties describing for each other the conflict situation and its related dilemmas and pressure points, focusing on possible resolution outcomes rather than on assigning blame; finally, the *integration* phase includes a range of actions mediated by the collaborative dialogue process, in which mutual respect is forged, commitment to the new solution is developed, and trust has been enhanced.
 - IX. *Transcendent discourse*: When intercultural conflicts involving power and identity issues that result in moral conflicts remain unresolved, Littlejohn (1995) advocates for the use of transcendent discourse which provides healthy ways in which differences can be expressed, allows all voices to be heard with respect, and avoids the negative patterns often associated with a moral clash.
 - X. *Interaction adaptability*: is the ability to change conflict goals and behaviors to meet the specific needs of the situation (Duran, 1985). It signals mindful awareness of the other person's perspectives, interests, goals, or all three, and a willingness to modify interests or goals to adapt to the conflict situation.

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