**Communications Options in Conflict**

**Ellen Kandell**

When you are faced with a conflict how do you typically respond? Do you always respond in the same way? According to Ruth Abigail and Dudley Cahn in *Managing Conflict Through Communication* (MA Pearson Education, 2011) there are three general categories of conflict communication responses: other-centered, self-centered or relationship-centered. Each of these possible responses has its own set outcomes, typical behaviors and messages. This article will explore the characteristics of each type of communication option.

Other centered communication

This type of communication is non-assertive and focuses on what the other person wants or needs, not your own needs. Habitually non-assertive people may be excessively apologetic, indecisive, evasive and may tend to avoid direct eye contact. The message they communicate is denial of the existence of conflict. Nonassertive communication has two forms: conflict avoidance and accommodation. If avoidance is chosen the result is often a loss to both parties because one doesn’t get their needs addressed ant the other may be unaware that he has she has caused a problem. If accommodation is chosen the conflict is suppressed and allows the other’s needs to be met. In the long run this is also a loss for both parties.

Self-centered orientation

This is characterized by domination and control by one person over another. A person with this orientation may appear to be argumentative or aggressive, controlling and selfish. Self-centered communication orientation can be passive aggressive or aggressive. In the former you’ll see behaviors such as backstabbing, sabotage and manipulation. In aggressive communication typical behaviors include, intimidation, competition, bullying and provocation. Aggressive communication can be verbal or physical.

Relationship Centered Orientation

In this response there is recognition of the needs of both parties in the conflict. It is characterized by assertive communication behavior. This means the ability to speak up for one’s interests and needs in a way that does not infringe on the other’s rights. Assertive communication is characterized by willingness to listen, respect for different points of view, and open expression of desires and feelings. Behaviors such as direct eye contact, confidence and competence are often evident. You’ll see striving for mutual understanding. In relationship centered communication the strategies are either compromise or collaboration.

Theory application tips

Effective communicators should follow the following guidelines in their conflict responses:

* First consider the situation surrounding the conflict including the physical location. Is this the right place to address this issue? Is this the best time for the conversation?
* Identify your needs and goals
* Try to anticipate the other person’s needs and perspective.
* Think about what strategy is the best for this conflict.
* Is a win-win solution possible in your view? Is the issue or the person important to you? If so try a collaborative or compromise strategy.
* If the issue is more important to the other person or you think you may have the wrong idea, then avoidance or accommodation may be the appropriate strategy.