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# COMMUNICATION FOR **CONSTRUCTIVE WORKPLACE CONFLICT**

JESSICA KATZ JAMESON

**WILEY** Blackwell



**Communication for Constructive  
Workplace Conflict**



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## Preface

Conflict is everywhere, all the time. This statement is obvious, but people may not fully appreciate the point. When someone says, “I don’t want to cause conflict,” what they really mean is that they do not wish to bring the conflict out in the open. The conflict, or the state of incompatible beliefs or goals, is already there. But the word “conflict” is associated with fighting, war, death, destruction, loss, and overall discomfort. As a result, people often choose not to directly engage in conflict and, ironically, increase their level of discomfort by prolonging and escalating the situation. People ruminate about it in the shower or when trying to sleep. They talk to family, friends, and coworkers. They blog about it or share their stories on social media sites looking for others who will validate their complaints, concerns, or feelings. What people don’t realize when they say, “I don’t want to cause conflict,” is that they are denying both themselves and others the possibility of solving a problem, transforming an uncomfortable situation, and/or improving a relationship.

On the other hand, people do routinely communicate their needs and collaboratively generate solutions. But when the interaction goes smoothly, it is not characterized as conflict. As a result, people may not realize that the same communication tools used in those situations can be applied to moments in which they are confronted by seemingly incompatible goals. The purpose of this book is to broaden the conversation about conflict to consider how people can overcome the sense of fear and futility it engenders. People, whether in leadership positions or line staff employees, can communicate in ways that help build workplace conflict environments that are supportive of constructive conflict, that is, environments that are inviting and productive rather than adversarial and uncomfortable.

This book is the product of over 20 years of research on conflict management in organizational settings. Over the years I have conducted research using a variety of methodological approaches, sometimes working with undergraduate and graduate students in controlled environments, but more often in the field, where

I have interviewed employees and observed communication in corporate jobs, healthcare organizations, nonprofit organizations, and state and county government. Most of my research has been applied, resulting in insights and implications from and for the various audiences I have worked with. Yet even though the types of people, professions, and organizations I have worked with are diverse in every meaning of the word (i.e., age, ability, sex, education, ethnicity, race, religion, social class, profession, rank, sexual orientation), some aspects of conflict and its management are remarkably consistent, and these have become the themes of this book. Over the years, I have taught numerous courses in conflict management, given many conference presentations, facilitated organizational retreats, conducted conflict management workshops, and served as a mediator for our university and state employee mediation program. These experiences have provided additional insights while serving to confirm the interactional patterns, dynamics, and conclusions found in more formal research studies.

Many books offer prescriptive conflict management advice for organizational leaders and members. My work with people in different organizational environments has revealed the many obstacles to putting those ideas into practice. When confronted with conflict in the workplace, many employees become paralyzed by what seems like a no-win situation. Fear of the hierarchy, perceptions of powerlessness, and organizational politics prevent people from speaking up, sometimes with severe consequences. Financial scandals destroy organizations and economies, planes crash, patients die, governments shut down. Yes, these are the most extreme cases; yet on the more modest side, failure to proactively engage in conflict results in tense workplace climates, relational deterioration, fatigue, absenteeism, and low morale. These environments have very real economic and health costs for organizations and their employees.

This book will not argue that every instance of conflict should be directly confronted; the old adage to “choose your battles” still applies. However, this book *will* demonstrate that the consequences of not taking on conflict directly can be serious for individuals, groups, and organizations. More importantly, I will illustrate that conflicts do not have to be “battles,” and, in fact, it is the prominence of this metaphor that is one of the biggest barriers to effectively managing conflict. Although other books provide examples of effective conflict management, often with the help of third-party intervention, those books do not convey how conflict participants overcome the obstacles to engaging conflict in the first place. Identifying strategies to overcome those obstacles is a gap this book seeks to fill. *Communication for Constructive Workplace Conflict* starts from the perspective that organizational members socially construct an environment that is either more supportive of conflict or, alternatively, discourages organizational members from engaging in conflict and seeking third-party

assistance. The introductory chapter will provide the theoretical framework for the book, outlining social construction theory broadly and then more specifically describing the communication as constitutive of organization (CCO) theoretical perspective (Brummans, 2013). The book then provides a specific framework for communication to illustrate how everyday communication can create a workplace environment that is supportive of constructive organizational conflict management.

The acronym LEARN stands for Listen, Engage, Acknowledge, Rapport (building), and Nurture (see Figure P.1). Listening may sound obvious, but it may be the hardest part of communication, especially in conflict situations. When people have a need, and they believe they know the best way to meet that need, they often find it difficult to really listen to other perspectives or alternatives. As I write this book, we are in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. While this is not a workplace conflict, per se, it has certainly created a public conversation about how best



**Figure P.1** LEARN framework for creating a constructive communication environment.

to meet what appear to be competing needs of public health and economic sustainability. The discussion of when and how to re-open businesses, schools, and public spaces is critically important, and, as we have seen, private citizens and public figures do not always seem open to listening to other perspectives and views, which escalates the conflict and complicates the decision-making and public policy process. As a mediator, I have seen firsthand how conflicts that started out adversarial and seemingly intractable, or highly resistant to resolution, turn into collaborative conversations once parties actually listen to the other person's underlying concerns and interests and better understand the other's perspective. When an environment is created that supports listening, it opens the door for creative brainstorming and problem solving that can lead to solutions that meet all parties' needs. This is certainly not a new idea, but common interpersonal and social conflicts demonstrate the challenges of listening. Unit One of this text addresses listening in detail, focusing first on the obstacles to listening (Chapter 2) and then presenting practical tools for practicing active and non-evaluative listening that can help individuals gain clarity on their own interests as well as better understanding the interests of others (Chapter 3). The remainder of the LEARN framework is best summarized with an anecdote from a nontraditional work setting: a Hollywood film set (described in Box P.1).

**Box P.1 Earning Public Support**

An assistant director (AD) was on a television set in downtown Los Angeles. They were shooting a scene for the television series "The Mentalist"<sup>1</sup> along the busy Hollywood Boulevard, which they were unable to shut down in the middle of the day. It is the AD's responsibility to make sure the conditions are exactly the way the director wants the scene to look, which in this case meant keeping the large crowd of tourists (interspersed with paid extras) under control. The AD started by introducing himself, "Hey guys, my name is Larry Katz, and I'm the assistant director for the TV show we are filming. We are going to be shooting in a minute, and I'm happy to have you stay here and even be in the scene, but we need everyone to be quiet to make this work, okay?" Once he had the crowd's attention he spoke to a few people individually while the camera and other crew were setting up the scene. "So where are you from? . . . Detroit? . . . Cool, how long have you been in LA?" When the

<sup>1</sup> For readers who may be interested, the actual scene shot was from Season One, Episode 19, "A Dozen Red Roses," (2009). <https://www.metacritic.com/tv/the-mentalist/season-1/episode-19-a-dozen-red-roses>.



director was ready, Larry returned to speaking to the whole group to regain their attention. “Okay, I need everyone to be quiet now . . .” Not only was the crowd quiet when he needed them to be quiet, tourists were helping him out by telling newcomers on the scene what was going on and when they needed to be quiet.

This brief anecdote is useful because it vividly demonstrates the process of proactively preparing for conflict and constructive conflict management. Larry accomplished several goals in the way he approached the situation:

- 1) He *engaged* the group whose help he needed immediately by directly speaking to the group of tourists, introducing himself and establishing his credibility as assistant director.
- 2) He *acknowledged* their interest in seeing a television show in production, and possibly being in the show, while also stating his own interest in completing the scene.
- 3) He built *rapport* with the group by offering an explanation about what was happening and why quiet was needed; this communication treated others as equals.
- 4) He *nurtured* the relationship by asking questions to maintain a level of engagement with individual members of the group, even at times when he did not immediately need something from the group.

In short, Larry communicated in ways that earned the respect of those whose cooperation he needed. In a nice coincidence, the four points above spell EARN, which, when combined with Listening, complete the LEARN acronym. It is also interesting to note that, unlike many workplace conflicts, there was no long-term relationship between Larry and this group of tourists, and some might argue he did not need to go to all the trouble of using such a constructive approach. Yet this communication acknowledged that a state of conflict existed: Larry and the tourists had potentially incompatible needs for the use of that space on Hollywood Boulevard. Through engaging the crowd, acknowledging his own needs as well as theirs, building rapport, and nurturing relationships, he generated goodwill from the crowd (as shown by the way they helped him do his job). As a bonus, he likely created goodwill toward the television show. I would be willing to bet that a large percentage of those tourists went home and told all their friends they might appear in a scene, and probably could not wait to get all their friends together to watch *The Mentalist*. While most people may not get to work under such “exotic” circumstances, this story is a great reminder of the role that people play as emissaries for their organizations and even industries. The extra effort Larry put in on the front end likely gained dividends on the back end for him and for his organization.

Unit Two of this text addresses the *engage* part of the LEARN framework. Many years of research on conflict styles have demonstrated two overarching dimensions to how people respond to conflict: they may actively engage using styles such as competing or collaborating, or they may use more disengaged and passive styles of avoiding or accommodating (Thomas & Kilmann, 1974; Putnam & Wilson, 1982; Rahim, 1983, 2011). Chapter 4 reviews common conflict styles models, while also describing the tendency to be more passive in the workplace due to power discrepancies, whether due to hierarchical role, one's interpersonal networks, or membership in privileged versus marginalized identity groups. While it is acknowledged that conflict styles have their basis in cultural norms (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003) and avoidance is sometimes the best strategy, studies of intercultural and inter-group conflict are included to provide implications for constructive conflict management that are sensitive to cultural differences. Chapter 5 continues to focus on the *engage* aspect of the framework by focusing on the importance of employee voice. The concept of organizational dissent is defined as communication that occurs when an organizational member disagrees with an action, activity, or policy of an organization or organizational leader (Kassing, 2011). This chapter illustrates the potential benefits of organizational dissent and communication strategies that help overcome the fear of speaking up in situations where power is a key concern.

Unit Three offers the recommendation to *acknowledge* others in conflict. An underlying source of conflict is often rooted in a lack of recognition of others, and, sadly, this is often connected to implicit bias and assumptions about what others are able to contribute based on characteristics such as ability, sex, class, race, and other demographic or social identity characteristics. Chapter 6 presents theories of identity in conflict transformation along with research demonstrating how face-saving communication supports collaborative conflict management. A case study of doctor and nurse conflict illustrates how power and identity are often underlying sources of conflict and provides specific examples of how acknowledging another's position, expertise, and/or needs during a conflict produces more productive communication that protects and sustains working relationships. Chapter 7 brings focus to the importance of acknowledging individual contributions in group and team settings. Acknowledgment is especially important as research supports the ease with which minority voices often go unrecognized or silenced in team communication. This chapter draws from a case study of non-profit board meetings to illustrate how the lack of acknowledgment is an impediment to deliberation and problem solving and, conversely, how confirming communication and acknowledgment help lead groups to constructive conflict management and productive decision making.

Unit Four covers the way that building *rappport* with others makes it easier to address conflict directly when it arises. Chapter 8 specifically attends to building

relationships and trust, including how we express emotion (Gayle & Preiss, 1998), provide social support (Boren, 2014), and incorporate relational needs into conflict management. This chapter demonstrates the long-term benefits of building rapport that establishes trust and either prevents future conflict or facilitates constructive conflict management. Chapter 9 focuses on rapport in terms of the importance of accepting one's own responsibility and role in conflict situations, which has been found in countless studies to be a major factor in moving conflict from adversarial to collaborative. This chapter also reviews the concepts of attribution error and implicit bias as obstacles to taking responsibility. Finally, the chapter describes implications of research on organizational apology (Bisel & Messersmith, 2012), forgiveness, and restorative justice (i.e., Paul & Putnam, 2017; Paul & Riforgiate, 2015), all of which emphasize nonjudgment, growth, and transformation.

Unit Five addresses the final part of the LEARN framework, *nurturing* relationships. Like building rapport, this is a long-term communication strategy that emphasizes a network perspective, reminding us of the importance of connections we have to others, both inside and external to our specific workplace. COVID-19, which has physically separated us and reduced the routine interactions of bumping into colleagues in the hallway, at the coffee station, or at the water cooler, has forced us to be more intentional in activating our networks to get our jobs done (or, for many people who are unable to work, to get basic needs met). It is much easier to call on someone for assistance when we already have a strong relationship in place. The same is true when conflict erupts: we will find it easier to directly and constructively address the problem if we have a good relationship with the other party. Chapter 10 emphasizes the organization's role in nurturing relationships by designing conflict management systems that adopt an interest-based orientation to conflict management (Ury, Brett, & Goldberg, 1988). Focusing on the interests of organizational members rather than who has the power in a relationship, for example, is more likely to foster goodwill and prosocial communication (that is, communication for the good of the group) that leads to constructive conversations. Chapter 11 specifically examines the role of online dispute resolution, virtual communication tools, and social media in conflict and collaboration. Managing conflict online has become more and more relevant as workplaces are more likely to be global and increasingly reliant on remote work. While social media use can have a negative effect on conflict by separating and polarizing those with disparate views (often referred to as filter bubbles or echo chambers), this chapter includes specific examples of organizations that are using social media and other forms of virtual communication to promote dialogue and participatory environments.

Chapter 12 concludes the book by synthesizing the preceding chapters to reinforce the LEARN framework in the context of developing communication networks that promote collaboration and productive conflict management. This chapter demonstrates the value of creating and supporting an organizational infrastructure that

connects internal organizational members and external constituents. In so doing, the LEARN framework becomes a way of being that creates expectations for communication and interaction that build a constructive environment.

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# 1

## Theoretical Framework – The Social Construction of Conflict

We now accept the fact that learning is a lifelong process of keeping abreast of change. And the most pressing task is to teach people how to learn.

Peter Drucker (1909–2005, management and leadership author)

It is fitting that the acronym for the communication for constructive workplace conflict framework is LEARN. It is often in those conflicts in which parties are open to learning something new, for example about another person's life experience, background, or values, that conflict is managed in the most collaborative and constructive manner. This is at least partially because every time someone learns something new – about another person or social identity group, experiences they have never had, or other worldviews – this new information has the potential to become part of how they see, understand, and talk about the world in which we live. This is a simplified version of a theoretical framework called the social construction of reality (Berger & Luckman, 1966; Searle, 1995).

This book is based on the assumptions of the social construction of reality: that it is through interaction and communication with others that humans build a set of norms, expectations, and understandings that then guide continued behavior and worldviews. Importantly, while this worldview and the rules that guide our behavior are somewhat stable, they also can (and in most cases do) change over time. Examples include change in what is considered “professional” attire in the workplace (what used to be suits and ties for men and dresses or skirts for women is, at least in the United States, no longer the norm). Expectations about where work is performed have also changed. We used to assume that workplace communication consisted of face-to-face interaction that took place among people co-located in the same physical space; yet given trends such as globalization, use of contractors, and telework, what we think of as organizational communication looks much different today.

In this introductory chapter, I discuss how the social construction of reality underlies organizational communication in general and how we talk about and manage conflict specifically. I begin by describing the organizational communication perspective of *communication as constitutive of organization* (Ashcraft, Kuhn, & Cooren, 2009; Kuhn, 2012) and then draw from political science theory to demonstrate the role of conflict processes in changing organizational and societal expectations using the *social conflict helix* (Rummel, 1976). Looking at social conflict is relevant to a book on workplace conflict because it brings to the forefront the role of power – who is perceived to have more, and who is perceived to have less – which creates underlying assumptions and implicit biases that must be identified and understood to make any progress toward constructive conflict management. Before delving into the theoretical framework, this chapter begins with a set of definitions of the key terms to be used throughout this textbook.

## Defining Conflict and Constructive Conflict Management

The meaning of the word *conflict* is broad and thus ambiguous and open to interpretation. When I use the term *conflict*, I am referring to the variety of situations in which one or more interdependent parties perceive incompatible goals or perceive that another party is trying to obstruct their goal achievement (Wilmot & Hocker, 2010). The term *goals* refers to both tangible goals, such as task completion, and implicit goals, such as how we present ourselves to others (identity goals) and how we negotiate our roles in different relationships (relational goals). As others have noted, conflict is by definition an emotional process (Jones, 2000) and, since expressing negative emotion can have negative consequences in the workplace, conflict often remains hidden from those who are in a position to do something to manage it (Kolb & Bartunek, 1992). For example, if an employee believes they are being overlooked for a promotion, they might experience anger. Rather than directing anger toward a supervisor, the employee may decide they cannot afford to lose their job or harm the relationship. Yet if the conflict remains hidden, nothing can be done to address the employee's concerns. Over time, this employee is likely to feel increased frustration which may result in poor performance as well as a variety of negative personal outcomes such as stress, burnout, and poor health. These outcomes are bad for the employee and the organization, which is why all organizational members should be motivated to build environments for constructive conflict management in the workplace.



The term *conflict management* is also a conscious choice over the term *conflict resolution*. The latter is an artifact of the dominant *rights-based* approach to conflict, which presumes that there is an objective solution to a conflict based on some rule or standard that will indicate who is right or wrong. My research, and that of many others, reveals that rights-based processes may resolve a specific issue in contention but do not resolve the entire conflict. Furthermore, there are many conflicts that do not have a right or wrong answer, and thus rights-based approaches fail to bring parties to a resolution. The term conflict management thus reflects the reality that underlying conflicts, especially those based on different assumptions, values, and worldviews, must continue to be managed. I also rely heavily on the term conflict transformation. *Conflict transformation* suggests a situation in which underlying *interests* (including task, identity, and relational goals) have been addressed, greater understanding has occurred, and the situation is changed to one in which the conflict no longer exists (or at least is deemed less important than the relationship). When conflict is authentically engaged with an emphasis on interests and when parties are open to learning, transformation is much more likely than in situations where conflict is avoided and remains hidden or in which one party uses rights or power to force a certain outcome. Transformation is often discussed in this book as the ultimate goal of constructive conflict management, although it is not always possible, practical, or achievable.

My definition of *workplace* comes from my identity as a scholar of organizational communication, a sub-discipline of the field of communication. *Organization* is difficult to define clearly because it can denote both the *process* of organizing to achieve a common goal and the *entity* that is created through the process of organizing (Nicotera, 2020). If we focus on the organization as entity, an organization might include a social club, advocacy group, or little league sports team. The contexts I have studied have primarily been places where people organize for work, such as businesses, universities, hospitals, or nonprofit organizations, and therefore this book focuses on the workplace as a sub-category of organizations.

*Organizational communication* is often defined as the interaction of interdependent parties to achieve a common goal. As many scholars have noted, the very essence of organizing is rife with tension, as organizational members have individual as well as common goals, and those goals are often in conflict (Mumby, 2013). When one considers the definition of conflict provided above – a situation in which one or more interdependent parties perceive incompatible goals or perceive that another party is trying to obstruct their goal achievement – it may appear obvious that organizations are, by their very nature, places where conflict is omnipresent.

This book therefore examines workplace conflict at all levels of the organization. *Dyadic conflict* occurs between two people, such as coworkers or between a supervisor and their direct report. *Group conflict* often occurs within a unit or a work team. *Inter-group conflict* may occur between two units or teams, but inter-group conflict might also describe contract disputes between workers and management, or conflict that occurs between members of different demographically based identity groups, whether stemming from differences in age, race, ethnicity, ability, or sexual orientation. Throughout this book there will be discussions of workplace diversity and multiple ways scholars have written about it, including intercultural conflict (such as Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003), social identity conflict (such as Tajfel, 1982), and the effect of diversity on workplace conflict (see Ayub & Jehn, 2014). The highest level of conflict takes place at the *organizational level* when organizations or industries are in conflict, such as conflict between hospitals and insurance companies or manufacturing companies and conservationists. While I firmly believe that the insights of the LEARN framework can be applied to other contexts (i.e., intimate relationships, family conflict, nation-states), I cannot make direct claims or provide cases that illustrate these contexts since my research has been limited to the workplace.

Finally, it is necessary to define the various parties that may be involved in workplace conflict. I often refer to conflict participants as *parties*. In describing conflicts that involve a *third party* – an individual who becomes involved to help manage or transform the conflict, I will often use the term *disputant* to distinguish the parties in conflict from the third party. In some workplace conflicts, one party has raised the conflict or even filed a formal grievance against another party. In such cases I will refer to that party as a *grievant* and refer to those they are in conflict with as the *respondent(s)*. While this language has a more rights-based or legal orientation, it is a good example of how the language we use to describe phenomena such as conflict limits how we understand and experience it. The way that organizations talk about conflict is directly related to whether organizational members perceive they can directly address it. For example, in an organization where coworkers repeatedly tell others not to “rock the boat,” a message is sent that raising conflict will lead to trouble, and an environment of conflict avoidance is likely to be created. The case in Box 1.1 summarizes a study of newspaper coverage of a city-wide conflict to demonstrate the language that city officials and journalists use to describe conflict and how it is managed. While it may be argued that this is not a workplace conflict, this case illustrates how media reporting influences the social construction of reality and how many people understand conflict and the options available for its management.

### **Box 1.1 The Social Construction of Conflict in City Government**

Following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, New York City faced the worst budget crisis in its history. Questions about how city officials would balance public needs for education, transportation, and critical social services (e.g., police, fire, and waste disposal) dominated the news. Unlike news coverage of international or national policy that may be perceived as having limited impact on the lives of ordinary citizens, these stories had direct consequences for citizens of New York City and the surrounding areas. Public policy decisions, such as city budgets, must be responsive to multiple stakeholders and thus create situations that are inherently conflictual. This provided an appropriate subject for an investigation of how newspaper journalists report on the process of conflict management, such as who participates, what communication venues are used, and how various interests are represented. This study brought conflict theory into conversation with theories of media and democracy to examine the role of journalism in the social construction of conflict.

In our analysis of newspaper coverage of this conflict (Jameson & Entman, 2004), Robert Entman and I examined whether attention was given to interests-, rights-, and power-based orientations to conflict (Ury, Brett, & Goldberg, 1988). Historically, organizations have been most likely to operate from rights- and power-based orientations. A rights-based orientation frames conflict as a dispute to be won or lost by the party with the better case or argument, consistent with a legal view of conflict. A power-based orientation is also adversarial, suggesting that conflicts are won or lost according to who has more power resources, rather than the better argument. An interest-based orientation offers a more collaborative response to conflict by examining the deeper needs or concerns underlying conflict issues and exploring creative ways to dovetail interests to the satisfaction of all parties. Importantly, interests are different from positions, which are one's stated desire or preferred outcome of a conflict (Fisher, Ury, & Patton, 1991). By clarifying the participants' interests instead of concentrating on the positions they take, interest-based techniques can transform disputes, yielding outcomes satisfactory to all and establishing trust that can enhance future interactions and negotiations.

Our thesis was that news coverage would be more likely to focus on a limited number of participants (primarily politicians and policy decision-makers) and emphasize positions over interests. This was based on journalistic norms that frame stories in terms of key players and polarized positions. Such framing supports the social construction of conflict as adversarial and further reinforces the belief that participation is futile because only those with power can impact conflict outcomes. Reporting only the positions of

politicians and key figures actually distances the issues from the public, whereas coverage of diverse citizens and their interests might enable readers to see the direct impact of the crisis on their lives and conclude that their participation matters.

We examined coverage of the budget crisis from January 1, 2002, to January 15, 2003, in the city's four leading newspapers of general circulation, *New York Daily News*, *New York Post*, *New York Times*, and *Newsday*. The analysis served two purposes: to explore the metaphors used in news of conflict over the budget, and to assess the extent to which interest-based methods (as opposed to rights- or power-based methods) are embedded in news stories. We found the most common conflict metaphor used across the four papers included *war* or *fight* language in describing the budget conflicts. This was found 61 times, more than twice that of any other conflict metaphor and almost as many as all others combined. Examples of this metaphor include references to the "budget battle," found in all four papers, "going to war with Albany" (*Post*), a proposal being "dead on arrival" (*Daily News*), "wrangling over budget cuts" (*NY Times*), and "taking a whack" at the car lobby (*Newsday*).

A second metaphor across the board was conflict as a game. The most common reference described that a proposal was either on or off "the table," with the *Times* using this metaphor 10 times in our sample. The *Post* referred to having "cards to play," and "playing the Albany game." The *Daily News* said that City Hall "couldn't play this one any closer to the vest," while *Newsday* quoted the Mayor as saying the city council may want to "play hardball." The game metaphor, while more neutral than the war metaphor, still suggests that conflict consists of adversarial teams and that there will be winners and losers. While in politics this is often true, the language obscures the possibility of constructive conflict management. Other metaphors found in all four papers, although less often, included conflict as something broken that needed to be fixed ("fiscal mess," "hammer out" an agreement) or conflict as a legal case. The legal metaphor reinforces the idea that conflict is adversarial and the goal is to present a winning argument.

The majority of references to conflict management strategies were power-based. This is consistent with our expectation in a society where the dominant conflict metaphor is war and where journalistic norms emphasize the adversarial nature of conflict. Conflict management described as a matter of politics is expected, but what is noteworthy is the lack of reference to opportunities citizens may have had to participate in the political decision-making process. In fact, in the sample of stories we analyzed, only one paper described

Bloomberg's attempts at "open government." *Newsday* ran a transcript of Mayor Bloomberg's State of the City Address in which he described the open office he created in City Hall:

In the bullpen [note use of the sports metaphor], there are no walls, no barriers to communication . . . anyone can get up and talk to anyone at any time, and that includes me. We are already extending this emphasis on communication and teamwork to other levels of government. (Janison, 2002)

If this case study is typical, media reporting of conflict undermines the public's ability to imagine more collaborative options for conflict management, not only in politics but perhaps also in other spheres of society. It reinforces the sense that public participation is not worth the effort because individuals cannot make a difference anyway. This further promotes a view of conflict as adversarial, combative, and futile, and impedes the ability to envision constructive ways of managing conflict.

The media analysis included one more finding especially germane to this point, and that is the relative paucity of media coverage of impacts of the budget conflict on everyday citizens. When journalists cover positions, they explain what each party wants: the mayor favors increased property taxes or the police chief argues to cut education spending (for example). But this does not get at the underlying interests. Reporting the interests would tell readers why people support their positions, such as increasing taxes in order to pay for public transportation or decreasing education spending to increase public safety. This is the information an individual needs in order to arrive at an informed position on the policy him- or herself and to understand the reasons why others might oppose that position. By elucidating the interests that lay beneath positions, media coverage could provide clarity on the issues and encourage participation in a public dialogue that leaves more people feeling satisfaction rather than alienation.

Yet our content analysis revealed that the four papers offered 389 statements of policy stands as opposed to 103 mentions of impacts. In other words, *positions* were discussed nearly four times as often as *interests*. The impacts receiving the most attention included the lessening of educational quality, negative consequences for the New York City economy, and difficulties for poor people resulting from the budget cuts. Given that the sample here consisted of 140 newspaper stories, the average story offered less than one mention of an impact (103 impacts/140 stories = 0.74 impacts per story),