

# **Developing Communication Repertoires to Address Conflict in Community Engagement Work**

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## **Abstract**

Due to their work engaging with diverse people representing varied institutions and community settings and addressing diverse issues and topics, community engagement professionals (CEPs) must serve as boundary spanners (*Child & Faulkner, 1998; Janke, 2009*) across differences. Quite often, interpersonal, organizational, cultural, and other differences lead to tensions and conflict. Though CEPs enter into positions and situations in which conflict exists, or is likely to exist, few have been professionally prepared to manage interpersonal conflict. Drawing on a competence-based approach to communicating about interpersonal conflict (*Cupach, Canary, & Spitzberg, 2010*), this essay suggests key communication capacities, including motivation, knowledge, and skills to manage conflict, even positively transforming conflict in ways that build understanding and relationships. Conflict management is not about learning a single model or a specific script to “end all conflicts.” Instead, conflict management involves developing competency with constructive practices through intentional, sustained effort. *Keywords:* Conflict, Communication, Competency, Community Engagement, Community Engagement Professional

“Truly, we do not have the option of staying out of conflict unless we stay out of relationships, families, work, and community. Conflict happens—so we had best be prepared for it.” (*Hocker & Wilmot, 2014, p. 8*)

## **Introduction**

**D**ue to their work engaging with diverse people representing varied institutions and community settings, community engagement professionals (CEPs) must regularly “do” boundary spanning across differences. Quite often, boundary spanning across differences (whether interpersonal, organizational, cultural, or from another source) leads CEPs to be involved in interpersonal tensions and even overt conflict. CEPs may experience tensions and conflict directly, or they may support, mediate,

or facilitate faculty, staff, students, and community partners experiencing conflict.

Indeed, in their chapter “High-Quality Community–Campus Partnerships: Approaches and Competencies,” Martin and Crossland (2017) name *conflict resolution* as a key skill for community engagement professionals (CEPs). Those authors describe the importance of CEPs in navigating individual, organizational, and institutional differences in ways that share power and solve problems. Few authors have addressed conflict competency in the field of community engagement (Martin & Crossland, 2017). Still, our practitioner-scholarship (see Dumlao, 2018 and Reimer et al., 2015) demonstrates the role of interpersonal communication in addressing conflict competently and with confidence.

Interpersonal conflict is just one form of conflict. Others types include *intrapersonal* conflict, wherein one struggles with one’s own emotions and thoughts; *structural* conflict, wherein external forces and constraints such as limited resources, positionality, or organizational changes create tensions among people or groups; and *social* conflicts such as social movements, international and transnational disputes, and political diplomacy. This reflective essay presents scholarship from the interdisciplinary fields of communication and peace studies to refine the definition of, and our approach to, interpersonal conflict only. Each of these fields focuses on communication as a way to transform conflict by working through differences to build better, stronger relationships. We focus on interpersonal conflict because interactions occur at the individual level, regardless of whether one is representing oneself, a group, or an organization. Further, these are the types of conflicts that CEPs likely face most frequently and would benefit most from learning to navigate competently and with confidence.

Links between interpersonal communication and conflict resolution cannot be overstated. Dumlao (2018) says people use communication to express struggles, to describe details from a particular perspective, to learn from one another, to generate workable responses, and to cocreate change (pp. 118–119). Hocker and Wilmot (2014) point out that communication behavior often creates conflict, reflects conflict, and, importantly, is the vehicle for productive or destructive management of conflict (p. 14). Matyók and Kellett (2017) say communication is “the primary praxis of non-violent conflict transformation and peacebuilding” (p. xi). Scholars from peace and conflict studies and communication use the term *conflict management*, rather than *conflict resolution*, to describe the many ways that people deal with conflict. The term *conflict*

*management* recognizes that not all conflict is to be eliminated, as some types of conflict are necessary and productive (as described more fully later in the essay).

John Paul Lederach (2014) argues for the use of the term *conflict transformation* as an alternative way of thinking about and designing practices for peace. Whereas *conflict management* and *conflict resolution* are two terms that describe efforts to reduce, eliminate, or terminate conflict (Reimer et al., 2015), Lederach would challenge CEPs engaged in conflict to focus not on simply resolving conflict to the satisfaction of the parties involved, but to build relationships and collectively imagine a desired future that might be different from the past in which the conflict emerged. This approach implies radical shifts in how individuals value each other, as well as in the structures required to support efforts to achieve the future desired by the community.

Conflict transformation aligns with and builds on John Galtung's (1996) conceptions of and distinctions between *negative peace* and *positive peace*. Negative peace describes the absence or cessation of violence, whereas positive peace describes the presence of nurturing relationships, the creation of social systems and structures that address the needs of individuals and communities, and the constructive resolution—and transformation—of conflict. For these reasons, we use, and recommend, the terms *conflict management* and *conflict transformation*, rather than *conflict resolution*, to describe the set of competencies needed by CEPs.

Thus CEPs must develop a repertoire of communication capacities, including knowledge areas and practiced skills, to draw upon to solve problems and manage conflict capably. Conflict management is not about learning a single model or a specific script to “end all conflicts.” Instead, conflict management involves developing competency with constructive practices through intentional, sustained effort.

Everybody has experience with interpersonal conflict and has informally learned conflict management techniques through their own experience and by watching others. However, few have taken the time to thoughtfully examine their approaches, or have benefited from a more studied approach to understanding the array of approaches one might take and the effects that each approach might have. Based on a review of scholarship, including our own (Dumlao, 2018; Reimer et al., 2015), we present a *communication competency* approach and suggest several frameworks and models that could provide a basis for CEP professional development. These

approaches, drawn from across the disciplines of peace and conflict studies and communication, can help to develop CEPs' communication repertoires and grow their competencies in conflict management. Finally, we offer some practical tools and strategies for CEPs to consider, explore, and adopt.

### **Interpersonal Communication and Conflict**

Conflict has been defined many ways, but one commonly accepted definition is an "expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who *perceive* [emphasis added] incompatible goals, scarce resources, and interference from others in achieving goals" (Hocker & Wilmot, 2014, p. 13). Conflict is frequently described as a perception and as an experience: One knows that one is in conflict because one feels that one is "in conflict" (p. 8) and one experiences dis-ease, a feeling that something is not right. When people work together, each brings his or her own perspective, including his or her perceptions, into interactions. As they talk, each person involved must interpret incoming verbal and nonverbal communication. Listeners rely on their individual and cultural histories, learned priorities, and any existing frame of reference about the other person and similar situations to make sense of what they see and hear.

Conflict, at its core, is about how people perceive each other and the situation. That is, conflict occurs because individuals have different ideas about how things "should be," reflecting their own values, beliefs, and attitudes. Further, because conflict emerges as a result of natural and inherent differences among individuals, conflict itself is very normal. Many human development and change management specialists say conflict is needed to transform individuals or circumstances for something new to develop. Shantz (1987) states, "Conflict is a central concept in virtually every major theory of human development" (p. 283).

So, if we situate conflict as normative rather than abnormal, learning to manage or transform conflicts positively is an essential capability that can be developed and refined. Conflict cannot, and should not, necessarily always be avoided. Some of the benefits of conflict managed well include (a) bringing problems to the table to be addressed (rather than having struggles occur without acknowledgment or attention), (b) helping people join together and clarify goals, and (c) clearing out resentments or misunderstandings so people understand each other better (see Hocker & Wilmot, 2014, pp. 46-47). Further, managing conflict and transforming it effectively

can help avoid abusive tactics such as verbal or physical aggression, since those tactics may no longer be considered necessary ways to achieve change (Cupach, Canary, & Spitzberg, 2010, p. 6). Also, learning to manage conflict competently can reduce risks to one's psychological and physical health (Cupach et al., 2010, p. 6), as well as offering alternative ways of seeing a tough problem (p. 5). Finally, conflict managed constructively can help build long-term satisfying relationships (Hocker & Wilmot, 2014, p. 8), such as those highly important to community engagement work. Constructive approaches are more likely to yield durable solutions (Cupach et al., 2010, p. 5). And, when managed well, conflict can lead to increased integration and cohesion among group members, as well as increased trust, motivation, group performance, and productivity (Katz, Lawyer, & Sweedler, 2011, p. 83).

Conflict happens in the context of other background factors, such as individual differences related to attachment styles, argumentativeness, taking conflict personally, locus of control, and sex/gender differences (see Cupach et al., 2010). For example, "argumentative individuals may show more competitiveness during conflict. Individuals who are shy may tend to avoid conflict more often" (p. 31). Background influences are shaped by predisposed and learned tendencies, which, in turn, influence how we think about and approach conflict (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012).

Although a number of background factors shape conflict, Ting-Toomey and Chung (2012) describe the importance of culture in one's attitude toward conflict. They share that individuals tend to have a "positive or negative attitude toward other groups [which] is acquired through our cultural socializations, family socialization, and personal life experiences" (pp. 42–43). Applied to conflict, different cultures have different value patterns, such as individualism and collectivism, and these shape conflict attitudes, expectations, and behaviors (p. 181). For example, cultures may view conflict differently with regard to (1) focusing on relationship versus content, (2) win-win or win-lose approach, (3) fixing something tangible versus repairing the relationship, and (4) seeing resolution as an outcome rather than an ongoing relational process (for more, see Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012). In these ways, one's dispositions and attitudes toward conflict may be shaped by one's culture.

Lulofs and Cahn (2000) share the significance of attitudes:

How people think and feel about conflict affects the way they make choices in conflict situations. If one approaches conflict as a problem to be solved or an

opportunity to persuade, more constructive choices are likely than if one views conflict as something to be feared. (pp. 13–14)

Destructive conflict, they point out, “is characterized by a tendency to expand and escalate the conflict to the point where it often becomes separated from the initial cause and takes on a life of its own” (p. 14). Destructive conflict can provoke retaliation. In instances where one “wins” and the other “loses,” the losing party may not remain committed to the agreed-upon arrangement or outcome. The “loser” may feel the need to reclaim position or status, correcting any implied inequities. Further, the conflict can fester emotionally because parties become entrenched in their own positions about the issues (pp. 14–15). In community engagement work, destructive conflict practices can derail possibilities for positive community-based changes. Destructive practices may stem, for example, from fear of loss, whether it is loss of reputation, opportunity, resources, or something else. Simply the concern or perception that conflict could or will emerge can prevent someone from even attempting to engage with another person or group. Effective communication and constructive conflict management, on the other hand, can help promote conflict transformations, or “ah-ha moments in which the lightbulb goes on and illuminates a situation in an entirely different way” (Putnam, 2010, p. 325). Developing greater competence in managing conflict communication can have far-reaching possibilities and consequences for partnerships and for communities.

### **A New View: Competence in Communication About Conflict**

Cupach et al. (2010) have developed a competence-based approach to interpersonal conflict based on their model of communication competence (Spitzberg, Canary, & Cupach, 1994). Communication competence, they say, involves individual judgments regarding both the *effectiveness* and the *appropriateness* of communication (Cupach et al., 2010, p. 20). Effectiveness involves the extent to which communicators achieve their resource, relational, or presentation goals, even though those goals vary in how much they matter in a particular context (p. 23). Appropriateness, on the other hand, has to do with how well communicators account for the social/cultural or interpersonal expectations of others (p. 27). A competent interpersonal communicator would tend to be both effective and appropriate in a given situation.

Notably, judgments about the effectiveness and appropriateness of communication are not absolute; they cannot be described as simply present or absent (Cupach *et al.*, 2010, p. 29). Instead, competence evaluations represent an overall impression of a person's appropriateness and effectiveness in a particular interaction (p. 29). Even so, perceptions of competence matter; they create positive or negative impacts on relational partners (p. 21). Perceptions of competence also become part of the relational history between those partners and influence the future choices they make as they communicate with each other (see Lulofs & Cahn, 2000, pp. 13–17).

The competence-based approach identifies three critical factors that can help a CEP be seen as, and likely feel, more competent in conflict: motivation, knowledge, and skills. Development of all three factors helps to increase the likelihood that one will be consistently competent in managing conflict (Cupach *et al.*, 2010). *Motivation* involves making the choice to be effective and appropriate in conflicts. For instance, a CEP must show a willingness to engage productively in moments when conflict arises. *Knowledge* involves identifying one's own goals and being aware of relevant social and relational rules (Spitzberg *et al.*, 1994, p. 31). Knowledge also involves understanding conflicts in general, or discerning what verbal or nonverbal behaviors would likely lead toward specific conflict consequences (p. 31). To navigate conflict, CEPs must have a developed understanding of conflict that includes such aspects as why it exists, where it comes from, how it is manifest, and its role in relationships and community building. Finally, *skills* involve performing verbal and nonverbal communication behaviors, thereby enacting knowledge and motivation through specific moves during conflict (p. 32). For instance, CEPs must develop the skill of being adaptable in how they communicate with others, appropriately tailoring communication to the person and situation. Certainly CEPs must build communication competency, “develop[ing] a diverse pool of communication strategies and tactics to draw from” (p. 32), and be able to choose among them to fit the people involved as well as the context. See Table 1 for an overview of the key conflict communication competency development areas for CEPs described more fully in the sections below.

**Table 1. Conflict Communication Competency Development Areas for Community Engagement Professionals (CEPs)**

<b>Areas for CEP conflict communication competency development</b>	<b>Why this competency area matters</b>	<b>Professional development tools</b>	<b>Community engagement example</b>
Motivation— A desire and the sense of one's ability to be appropriate and effective	CEPs must engage in and through conflict to do their community engagement work effectively and positively.	Conflict paradigm that posits that conflict can be productive Conflict transformation goals Desire to create positive outcomes	A CEP feels that one can and will engage with a partner on a difficult topic and will be appropriate and effective in identifying and achieving the goals of each partner.
Knowledge— Awareness and understanding about one's own and others' different approaches to conflict	CEPs must be aware of and build a base of concepts that inform how conflict can work constructively.  CEPs must develop self-knowledge and understand one's role in conflict.	Thomas-Kilmann Instrument Dialectical tensions	A CEP understands that one has a different approach to engaging with a partner about a difficult topic and that this different approach is causing tension.

*Table continues on next page.*



<p>Skills— Practiced abilities to draw from diverse strategies in conflict situations</p>	<p>CEPs must develop a repertoire of verbal and nonverbal behaviors to manage and transform conflict.</p>	<p>Adaptability/ Flexibility in choosing approaches Presenting and sharing information Reflective listening Appreciative inquiry Nonviolent communication Supportive communication Learning conversations Listening skills Restorative practices Circle processes</p>	<p>A CEP tries a different way of communicating based on one's observation of the conflict because one sees a reaction from one's partner that was not what one expected or hoped for.</p>
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## Motivation

Community engagement professionals enter into positions and situations in which interpersonal conflict exists, or is likely to exist, even though few entered into their positions to be conflict workers per se. Instead, CEPs tend to see themselves as community organizers, community builders, and even peacebuilders (see, for example, *Avila, Knoerr, Orlando, & Castello, 2010; Boyte, 2009; Reimer et al., 2015*). In fact, many people are averse to conflict and seek to avoid it in most situations (*Kilmann & Thomas, 1977; Thomas & Kilmann, 1974*). They may see conflict as a sign that something is wrong—and that someone is to blame for creating the conflict in the first place. “Who started it?” is a common question parents ask children who are fighting, for instance, with the intent to understand the cause of the troubles. In a professional setting, such as when a CEP is working on behalf of an institution to develop or maintain community partnerships, moments of communication gone awry, or disagreement, can even be seen as indicating that the CEP is “bad” at his or her job.

However, people and human communities are at the center of community engagement, and conflict often happens when differences intersect. Again, it is important to remember that conflict is not just about fighting, but can be experienced when individuals or groups *perceive* incompatible goals, scarce resources, or inter-

ference from others in achieving their goals. CEPs advocate for and situate themselves in boundary-spanning roles and spaces, placing them in the middle of dilemmas; power imbalances; and historical, current, and systemic injustices. In this way, conflict can and will be present. CEPs have encountered numerous examples of interpersonal conflict: hearing neighbors express anger about the noise level of students living in their neighborhoods; hearing community partners express impatience with students' tardiness at service-learning sites; receiving e-mails from parents expressing concern about a service-learning site; hearing students express frustration about the level or type of supervision received at their service-learning sites; and listening to faculty express concern that their colleagues do not recognize the scholarly contributions of their engaged work.

***Spotlight CEP motivation areas.*** A critical dimension of CEP competency development for managing and transforming conflict must focus on how CEPs think about and approach those moments when one person faces opposition to someone else in ways that seem incompatible or uncomfortable and thus make them feel disrespected or unvalued. The motivation to engage, not just as a community builder or as a peacebuilder, places CEPs in the role of a conflict worker as well. In this way, motivation is a psychological aspect that resides within the CEP and is shaped by whether that person (a) believes that she or he has the *ability* to identify and implement an approach that is likely to produce positive results and be effective and (b) believes that the approach used *will result* in positive outcomes in the particular situation or circumstance and be appropriate (*Cupach et al., 2010*). For example, a CEP may take a new position at a university that has negative relations with many residents in the neighborhood adjoining campus. The disputes largely stem from the university's purchase and development of property to build student housing. Many residents have publicly protested the development and have spoken harshly to university members on various occasions. The new CEP would like to establish mutually beneficial and reciprocal partnerships and projects for students and residents in the neighborhood. If one wishes to pursue this goal for community engagement, the CEP must have confidence in their ability to navigate the necessary relationships effectively, and they must believe that their efforts will be received by the residents in a way that makes them effective. More than likely, a lot of listening to the deeper issues and the concerns of those involved will be needed as a first step!

## Knowledge

Feeling motivated to engage with people and in situations that are likely to involve conflict is tied to developing a knowledge base about oneself in relation to others, as well as about different levels and types of conflict. Essential conflict knowledge (and related scholarship) also includes, but is not limited to, social, structural, ethnic, identity-based, environmental, and organizational factors that can shape conflicts. For example, interpersonal conflict is shaped by social contexts in which individuals and groups experience conflict based on competing interests, different identities, and differing attitudes (*Schellenberg, cited in Reimer et al., 2015, p. 5*). Interpersonal conflict can also be shaped by the way that organizations and governments are structured (i.e., organizational contexts), which guide and constrain individual perceptions and behaviors. For instance, power bases in an organization help determine resources that flow down to individuals, like CEPs, to do community-engaged work. By drawing from scholarship in peace and conflict studies, communication, and other fields, CEPs can better understand why conflict occurs in different contexts, which in turn will help them identify strategies that best serve their goals and the goals of their partners.

Given our understandings of conflict and community engagement work, we believe that several knowledge areas are most relevant to CEPs. Arguably, rigorous professional development would include the development of a CEP's knowledge about (a) personal approaches and responses to conflict (to include the CEP's own and that of others), (b) cultural differences related to conflict, and (c) how organizational or structural contexts can create and perpetuate conflict between individuals and among groups.

**Spotlight CEP knowledge areas.** Understanding personal preferences related to conflict is a critical first step toward being able to effectively identify and address tensions, so we spotlight several tools to help build CEPs' knowledge about interpersonal conflict. For instance, one commonly used tool for examining personal styles in conflict is the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI). The TKI is an assessment that helps individuals better understand how they tend to respond when their needs differ from others' (i.e., are in conflict). This tool classifies styles into five categories (accommodating, avoiding, compromising, controlling, collaborative) that fall within two axes: concern for relationships and concern for personal goals. With an orientation classified according to the five categories, a person can examine ways that orientation tends to interact with other conflict styles and can con-

sider the benefits and drawbacks of each style in interactions. An individual's preferred conflict style may change depending on the situation. For example, someone who is conflict avoidant with their parents may be more collaborative with work colleagues. Further, one can intentionally adjust one's style to create a different interaction and, ultimately, a different outcome. For example, someone who has been conflict avoidant with his or her parents historically, or about specific issues, may choose to act in more collaborative ways, trying out proactive strategies that can help both sides come to a satisfactory outcome.

We have used the TKI and related tools to facilitate learning about teamwork and collaboration, as well as to facilitate discussions with those experiencing conflict. For example, many of us like to imagine that we are collaborative in our approaches to conflict—that we are proactive and cooperative, working with others to find solutions that satisfy the concerns of all involved. However, using the TKI, a CEP could learn that he or she tends to be conflict avoidant—tending to be passive, acting in uncooperative ways that neither help achieve goals nor address the concerns of the partner. Recognizing different personal approaches to conflict, including one's own, can help a CEP identify what might or might not be effective when working with others, enabling the CEP to promote constructive, rather than destructive, conflict. Though one cannot force another party to engage, or to change how they engage in conflict, becoming knowledgeable about options for different situations can help the CEP understand how best to work with the person “where they are.”

In addition to the TKI, we contend that awareness about *dialectical tensions* in relationships is an essential component of building a strong knowledge base for CEPs. The term *dialectics* refers to inherent continuums of tension that individuals must navigate in relationships (Sabourin, 2003), such as those common to all partnerships: openness versus closedness, novelty versus predictability, and interdependence versus autonomy. For example, a faculty member may be working to develop a community engagement project with a school principal as part of a service-learning course. The faculty member shares very little information with the school principal about her plans for engaging the elementary students. She tends not to disclose very much information, assuming a “need to know” stance because she is aware that the principal is very busy. However, the principal may be very interested in learning about service-learning and wish to be more deeply engaged in the partnership and project. The principal may feel exploited and frus-

trated. The principal could begin to detach, relationally and practically, from the project. The faculty member, meanwhile, may be unaware of the principal's response. In this instance, it is important that the two have a learning conversation about preferences for how they want to be treated. In this instance, they are experiencing tensions between interdependence and autonomy, and also perhaps between openness and closedness. Tensions like these, resulting from interpersonal or organizational sources, can be experienced in community–university partnerships, yet can also be managed effectively through learning conversations (*Dumlao & Janke, 2012*). Awareness of such dialectical tensions is an important component of being able to address tensions effectively. For instance, we might want to learn how the partner wants to be treated, recognizing that this may be different from the way we want to be treated ourselves. Thus, one communication strategy or skill for CEPs to develop would be ways of holding learning conversations to support relationships and growth in community–higher education partnerships (see *Stone, Patton, & Heen, 2010*).

We all have characteristic ways of communicating, with aspects that include verbal, nonverbal, and even listening style. Our habitual ways of communicating may blind us to how we are communicating, and we may not realize how others are interpreting what we do and say or even how we are listening. For example, listening styles may be relational, analytical, task oriented, or critical thinking (see Table 2 for more description of listening styles). A faculty member may listen to a community partner speak using a task-oriented approach—focused on identifying a service-learning project for his students. Throughout their conversation, the faculty member would be focused on setting up specific activities and schedules for students' work at the community partner site. The community partner, however, might listen to the faculty member using a relational approach. He would be gauging how the relationship will work and might be starting to feel concerned that his ideas and needs will be ignored. He might be less concerned with the tasks and more concerned with figuring out whether the faculty member will be a good partner for him and his organization. Knowledge about different approaches to listening, learning about preferences in how others want to be heard, understanding how these differences in listening contribute to interpersonal communication and conflict, and being able to adapt as appropriate—all these are important for carrying on conversations that help constructively manage a conflict.

**Table 2. Listening Styles Chart**

Listening styles are habitual ways or individual preferences to receive and process incoming information. Use this chart to define where you are as a partner now and to identify what might help the partnership work better!

<b>Style Name</b>	<b>Key Characteristics</b>	<b>Strengths</b>	<b>Limitations</b>	<b>Suggestions</b>
Relational	Individual tends to focus on understanding the emotions of others. Wants to connect with the other and have them “feel understood.”	Very oriented toward relationship building and using emotional intelligence. Useful in promoting the partnership, especially during stress.	Could be over-focused on the relationship and miss other kinds of incoming information.	Watch for contexts and situations that might need more “content” information. Learn to use other styles when beneficial to partners or the work.
Analytical	Individual tends to withhold judgment and consider all sides of an issue or all aspects of a person’s perspective. Wants the “whole message.”	Very in-depth approach. Useful to identify multiple perspectives/ contexts that could affect the partnership.	Could be so focused on the big picture of a conversation and miss important, “minor” details.	Watch for a particular set of details or message elements that are critical to the partner OR the partnership in the current situation.
Task-focused	Individual tends to see a listening transaction as a “task” to be completed. Wants to stay focused and “on topic.”	Very goal-oriented. Useful to move partnership goals forward.	Could be overfocused on getting listening done and miss partnership information.	Watch for ways to stay involved with listening to the other and more fully connected to them, not just to the content being shared.
Critical listening	Individual tends to watch for accuracy and consistency when listening to others.	Very logic-oriented. Could help identify areas of concern that partners may need to address.	Could be so focused on accuracy that makes the other partner not want to talk.	Watch for ways to listen without judgments to what matters to the partner both in terms of content and the relationship.

*Author’s note:* This chart was developed by me based on listening styles and characteristics found in Bodie, Worthington, and Gearhart (2013). The strengths, limitations, and suggestions are mine. (See also Watson, Barker, & Weaver, 1995.) From *A Guide to*

*Collaborative Communication for Service-Learning and Community Engagement Partners*, by R. Dumlao, 2018, Sterling, VA: Stylus. Used with permission.

A third, and critically important, area of competence development for CEPs is knowledge about how conflict can be perceived and expressed across cultures. For example, Darla Deardorff has developed approaches and workbooks on intercultural competence, “the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one’s own intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (Deardorff, 2004 as cited in Deardorff 2006, p. 192). Stella Ting-Toomey (2005) argues that scholars and practitioners need to develop culturally sensitive knowledge, mindfulness, and skills to be adaptable and flexible in a given conflict situation.

An important aspect of knowing is not knowing, or knowing what you do not know. This is true for cultural competence, as well as for effectively managing and transforming interpersonal conflict more generally. Therefore, an important intellectual practice is to “hold lightly” the assumptions one makes and the “stories” that one holds about an interaction, person, or situation while continuing to collect evidence about the motivations or goals of the conflicting party (Shockley-Zalabak, 2015). This is important in all conflict, but especially in situations in which cultural differences may be present because, as Ting-Toomey (2010) points out, intercultural conflict “often starts out with diverse expectations concerning what constitutes appropriate and inappropriate verbal and nonverbal behaviors in a conflict encounter scene. Violations of expectations, in turn, often solidify the attributional bias and subsequent communication responses that individuals use” through the course of the conflict (p. 143). Scholars have begun to integrate intercultural competence training into community engagement scholarship and professional development practices, and it is indeed crucial to understand the way cultures interact with conflict specifically.

Ultimately, CEPs who have established competency in communication about conflict will have useful information to craft an approach or response to conflict. Such information might include awareness about one’s own goals for the relationship or situation, as well as relevant cultural, organizational, or other contextual factors that shape how conflict is perceived and performed.

## **Skills**

The use of effective conflict management skills can help turn stressful and difficult situations into “experiences of openness and

clarity where mutual goals are served and relationships enhanced” (Katz, Lawyer, & Sweedler, 2011, p. ix). For the field of community engagement to progress in bringing community members together and fostering meaningful change, practitioners need to develop a repertoire of communication skills, such as listening to one’s own thoughts and feelings, listening to the thoughts and feelings of others, and the ability and confidence to call upon a set of strategies that are appropriate and effective in meeting the goals of the people in conflict. Committing to “interior work” is a key foundational skill and practice of successfully managing interpersonal conflicts, as we often think of what we need to say to someone else and skip over the first and more important step of what we have to understand for and about ourselves. Therefore, conflict management skill development focuses on skills to clarify one’s own feelings, thoughts, and goals, as well as skills to clarify understanding and appropriate and effective interactions with others.

**Spotlight CEP skills.** A key characteristic of a skilled practitioner is having a repertoire of multiple complex communication skills. Key skills include presenting and sharing information clearly (McCornack, 2016), reflective listening (Katz et al., 2011), appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider, Whitney, & Starvos, 2008), collaborative problem solving, principled negotiation (Fisher, Ury, & Patton, 2011), nonviolent communication (Rosenberg, 2015), supportive communication practices and listening styles (Dumlao, 2018), restorative practices and restorative justice (Zehr, 2002), receiving and sharing feedback (Stone & Heen, 2014), circle processes (Pranis, 2005), and, perhaps most important, appropriate skill selection and flexibility among the different possibilities. Many activities, handbooks, workshops, and programs, rooted in scholarship and developed through the authors’ practical experience, are available to guide development of these various skills. Such skills are valuable not only for conflicts that CEPs are directly involved in (as a conflict partner), but also when acting in a third-party role as a coach, facilitator, or mediator. With each of these skills, guidelines are available for ways to speak and interact with others, to build understanding and empathy, and to foster stronger relationships.

Common across many of the skills presented here are several communication practices that build understanding and relationships as a way to help conflict partners achieve goals (Dumlao, 2018). These include (a) describing a situation by carefully choosing words that avoid judgment of the person or the situation; (b) taking a “we” stance in order to work together initially to identify the root problems and potential solutions while also recognizing that each of us



has “me” interests, perspectives, and expertise; (c) describing interests (i.e., what is wanted or needed) rather than taking positions (i.e., taking an inflexible stance); (d) seeking to understand the other person’s needs and wants (empathy); and (e) being willing to learn and explore new possibilities for behavior, attitudes, and ideas rather than staying fixed in a single mind-set or way of behaving.

Introducing new structures for “scripting” communication, particularly when someone is experiencing conflict, can be powerful. For example, we have each used collaborative frameworks in our teaching that include helpful sentence starters (e.g., “When I observe (see, hear, remember, imagine) . . . I feel (anxious, worried, excited).” Students then practice new “scripts,” choosing their words differently based on a mutuality perspective. Giving students and others practice in managing conflict when not “in the heat” of a conflict can be a dynamic way to build new skills and capabilities.

Two recent books were written by the authors to support community engagement professionals as they work to manage and transform conflict. Scholarship and approaches presented in *A Guide to Collaborative Communication for Service-Learning and Community Engagement Partners* (Dumlao, 2018) and *Transformative Change: An Introduction to Peace and Conflict Studies* (Reimer et al., 2015), for instance, could serve as a starting point for further scholarship and professional development for CEPs as they develop their repertoires and grow their competency in conflict management. The skills that we present here have been chosen for their practicality, as well as for their relevance to community engagement partnerships. For brevity’s sake, we have listed common practices drawn from the fields of communication and peace and conflict studies, but we encourage others to bring additional strategies to this work from other disciplines and fields.

In this essay, we have focused mainly on developing interpersonal conflict management and conflict transformation tools so that we can manage conflict on our own. Sometimes, however, we need help from someone who is outside or apart from the conflict. For example, a CEP may be in a situation where things are really tense, and one’s conflict management strategies seem not to be working. It is possible that despite one’s efforts, destructive conflict continues, and perhaps even escalates. Sometimes the people on opposite sides of a difference may be well intentioned, but things may not be headed in a constructive direction because of a need for change in a structure. That is, external forces create circumstances in which conflict emerges and persists. Hence, conflict may not always be based solely in the people involved; rather, it may reflect

external factors that must be addressed. Sometimes both personal and external factors may be involved. The best next step to address the conflict might be to engage someone who can provide a different perspective, playing a third-party role, such as a colleague who can coach the parties involved or help to mediate the conflict. Though third-party mediation is beyond the scope of this essay, we recommend that future articles and studies address third-party approaches to conflict management in community engagement, including coaching, facilitation, mediation, organizational development, and ombuds services.

Another aspect of conflict management and transformation is healing, forgiveness, reconciliation, and justice (*Hocker & Wilmot, 2014; Lederach, 2014; Zehr, 2002*). These are aspects of transforming interpersonal conflict to create positive conditions and good relationships after conflicting parties have experienced harm. Harm may include feelings of betrayal, mistreatment, disrespect, or resentment, as well as loss of power, ownership, or resources. Trust may be eroded, making it difficult or impossible to proceed constructively without relational repair work. Some conflict is particularly harmful and enduring. When that kind of harm has been done, it can ruin a moment, a day, or a lifetime.

Whether intentional or inadvertent, harm occurs in community-higher education relationships. The harm may be caused by an individual—a student sprays graffiti on a neighborhood center. Sometimes the cause of harm is a policy—a community partner who had expected to share costs for food related to a service-learning project discovers, after costs have been incurred, that university/state policy does not allow reimbursement for food. And sometimes the cause of harm is a practice or an incident—the university buys and demolishes homes of long-time renters in an adjacent neighborhood to expand student housing. How do we enter these spaces in which people and communities feel harmed, and how do we repair them so that we might have positive and productive relationships and interactions in the future? These areas hold many scholarship and practitioner tools that can be further explored and developed as additional CEP competencies.

## **Conclusion**

Conflict can be seen as a dance wherein

participants have to learn how close and how far to move, how to regulate distance, when to slow down and when to speed up, how to maintain contact with part-

ners so you know where they will be, and how to end the dance. (*Lindbergh, 1955 as cited in Hocker & Wilmot, 2014, p. 55*)

If conflict is like a dance, then the competencies needed make up a dancer's repertoire. A dancer, or a CEP who is competent in interpersonal conflict, must learn, rehearse, and hone a series of "moves" or "steps" to achieve precision in execution. Over time, the dancer's continued practice provides a foundation of moves from which to improvise, giving a sense of grace, familiarity, and ownership. The experienced dancer (or CEP), through a sense of embodied knowledge and skill, establishes a level and style of performance, as well as gaining a comfort and confidence in the movements chosen, even when in a new situation, with a new partner, or in a new venue.

Conflict is incredibly complex. Like each relationship, each conflict is unique, as each person is situated in her or his own experiences, preferences, values, cultures, and goals. Perhaps one of the reasons the community engagement literature offers so little on interpersonal conflict is because conflict is embarrassing, and, well, *personal*. Focusing on organizational or cultural aspects of conflict, but not *also* including interpersonal elements of conflict, can take attention away from our own role in the conflict. For example, the misalignment of academic and community schedules is an oft-cited source of structural conflict experienced by CEPs and community partners. But how do individuals navigate known issues and structural tensions with their partners? What strategies do they use to communicate personally so that these potential sources of conflict are managed productively to create better understanding and stronger relationships? These are also important questions to consider and address.

The challenge, and limitation, of this reflective essay is to provide broad guidance on a topic that is necessarily complex and (inter)personal. We urge CEPs to recognize interpersonal conflict management as an area in which competencies can be developed and refined, and that a great deal of understanding and practice has been generated by many different disciplines. The quote attributed to Maya Angelou—"Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better"—is a helpful way to think about the intersection of the knowledge and skills CEPs must develop in order to be competent and confident in conflict management and conflict transformation. We feel that, so far, CEPs have been doing their best to engage across differences, learning

to manage various interpersonal conflicts through trial and error; however, we also feel that, as a field, we can know, and do, better. Developing a repertoire of motivation, knowledge, and skills in managing conflict can help us all do just that!

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