**Confident Communication:**

**Strategies for Communicating with the Disagreeable**

**Presented by**

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**Dr. Steven A. Beebe** is Regents’ and University Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Communication Studies at Texas State University. He served as Chair of his department at Texas State for 28 years and concurrently as Associate Dean of the College of Fine Arts and Communication for 25 years. He was a tenured faculty member at the University of Miami for 10 years prior to his 33 years of teaching at Texas State University.

**Scholarship**: He is author, co-author, and co-editor of 15 books (with editions totaling more than 85 books) that have been used at hundreds of colleges and universities throughout the world (including international, Canadian, Russian, and Chinese editions) by several million students. He has authored or co-authored more than 75 articles and chapters, plus more than 230 papers and presentations at professional conferences.

**International Recognition**: Dr. Beebe has been a Visiting Scholar at both Oxford University and Cambridge University and was elected a permanent member of the Common Room of Wolfson College, Oxford University. Steve has given lectures, conference presentations, and webinars throughout Europe, Asia, and Central America and made fifteen visits to Russia between 1993-2015 where he has helped to establish the first communication studies programs there.

**C. S. Lewis Research:** He made international headlines when conducting research at Oxford University when he discovered an unpublished manuscript written by C. S. Lewis that was the partial opening chapter of a book that was to be co-authored with J. R. R. Tolkien called *Language and Human Nature.* Steve’s research about C. S. Lewis is summarized in his well-received book, *C. S. Lewis and the Craft of Communication*. In 2022 he was named *Scholar of the Year* by the Religious Communication Association.

**Professional Leadership:** Dr. Beebe served as President of the National Communication Association, the largest professional academic communication association in the world. He also served as President of the Florida Communication Association and is a founding member of the Russian Communication Association.

**Training, Speaking and Consulting Expertise**: He is in demand as a consultant, trainer, teacher, and speaker listing such clients as IBM, 3M, American Express, Knight-Ridder Publishing, U. S. Air Force, Pearson, U.S. Department of Education, U. S. Department of Defense, the Governor of Texas Executive Development Program, and many other organizations, colleges, universities and state agencies.

**Honors**: He was in the first class of *Regents’ Professors,* the highest faculty recognition bestowed by the Texas State University System. He received the *Lifetime Achievement Award* from the National Communication Association Training and Development Division. In 2020 Steve and Sue, received the *Order of Attainment* from the national debate/forensics honorary *Pi Kappa Delta*; previous inductees include President Lyndon B. Johnson and Governor Ann Richards. His alma mater, the University of Central Missouri, selected him, along with his wife, Sue, as *Distinguished Alumni for 2010*. While at Texas State he received the *top presidential and faculty senate awards* for teaching, research, and service.

He has received teaching awards at each university where he has taught. In 2018 Dr. Beebe was named *Piper Professor* by the Minnie Stevens Piper Foundation recognizing him as one of the top ten professors in Texas among all academic disciplines. In 2024 Dr. Beebe received the *Wallace A Bacon Lifetime Excellence in Teaching Award* from the National Communication Association. The National Speaker’s Association has named him *Outstanding Communication Professor* in America.

**What Do You Want to Learn?**

1. What are the characteristics of someone who is a confident communicator who manages conflict well? What do they do to help manage conflict and tension effectively and confidently?
2. What are the characteristics of someone who manages conflict and difficult conversations poorly? What do they do that increases conflict and tension?
3. **What would you like to learn** about managing conflict, more effectively responding to others during difficult conversations that would increase your confidence as a communicator?

What Is Conflict?

Conflict is: (1) an expressed struggle (2) between at least two interdependent people (3) who perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources, and interference from others (4) to achieve specific goals. (Hocker, Berry and Wilmont)

■ **Expressed struggle**: A disagreement expressed nonverbally and then verbally.

■ **Between at least two interdependent people:**What happens to one person affects others.

■ **Incompatible goals, scarce resources, interference:**Two or more people want the same thing, yet they can’t have it.

■ **Achieving a goal:** It is important to figure out what each person wants.

**Myths About Conflict**

Myth 1: Conflict Should Be Avoided at All Costs.

Conflict is a natural byproduct of communication.

**Myth 2: Conflict Is a Sign of a Poor Relationship.**

Conflict is an element in every relationship.

Myth 3: Conflict Occurs Because Misunderstandings.

Conflict may occur because you have communicated clearly.

Myth 4: All Conflict Can Be Resolved.

Sometimes we simply must agree to disagree.

**How to Push Someone’s “Hot Buttons”**

■ **Evaluate them:**

Criticize something personal about them.

■ **Control them:**

Try to manipulate them.

■ **Act superior:**

Tell them you know more than they do.

■ **Tell them they are wrong:**

You have the truth, they don’t.

**Draw Your Listening Energy Cycle**

**Highest**

**Energy**

**Level**

**Sleep**

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**MIDNIGHT**

**Gottman’s Four Horses of the Apocalypse**

**When these four “horses of the Apocalypse” are consistently present in conversations there is more than 90% likelihood of separation.**

■ **Criticism: Leveling Personal Attacks**

■ **Defensiveness: Erecting Barriers**

■ **Contempt: Assuming Superiority**

■ **Stonewalling: Withdrawing**

***Gottman & Gottman. Fight Right: How Successful Couples Turn Conflict into Connection (2024).***

Overview of Skills for

Managing Difficult Conversations

Focus on People First, the Problem Second

Manage Emotions:

* + Be aware of your emotions and the emotions of others.
  + Use productive strategies to better manage emotions.

Manage Communication:

* + Express your ideas clearly and appropriately.
  + Listen and confirm understanding of the ideas of others.

Manage the Goal:

* + Identify your interests and positions.
  + Identify other’s interests and positions.
  + Identify overlap between interests and positions.

Manage the Problem:

* + Use an agenda to structure the conversation.
  + Define and analyze issues, positions and interests before proposing solutions.

**Step One: Manage Emotions**

* Recognize that you are involved in a difficult conversation.
* Establish rapport: Start soft by avoiding the “bomb drop” or “door in the face” start.
* Don’t express intense, “over-the-top” emotions:

Monitor your vocal volume and speed.

Monitor your facial expressions.

Monitor your posture and gestures.

* Breathe.
* Avoid “pushing hot buttons” (personal attacks and name calling).
* Be aware of and manage “flooding”—“fight/flight” intense emotions.
* Use self-talk.

Use your name during self-talk to get your attention.

Be aware that you are becoming emotional, especially flooding.

Name the emotion: anger, frustration, disappointment, etc.

Consciously decide whether to express your anger.

Remember: “*Life is 10% what happens to you and*

*90% how you respond to what happens to you*.”

Decide: What can I change/not change?[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Emotion Management Skills**

■ **Body: Physical Emotion Management Strategies**

* + Identify and manage sources of stress.
  + Act calm to feel calm.
  + Eat well.
  + Rest well.
  + Exercise well.
  + Play well.
  + Breathe.

■ **Mind: Mental Emotion Management Strategies**

* + Recognize that you control how you react and respond.
  + Recognize the emotion you are feeling.
  + Identify the cause of the emotion.
  + Use self-talk: Be mindful and aware.
  + Visualize effective interpersonal relationships.

■ **Spirit: Spiritual Emotion Management Strategies**

* + Identify and practice what keeps you spiritually centered and in a “good place” (e.g. reading, music, meditation, exercise).
  + Frequently talk with a supportive friend, partner, or spiritual advisor who will listen.
  + Make time to meditate. (See: *10% Happier* by Dan Harris)
  + Find a time and place to be still/quiet.

**Step Two: Manage Communication**

* **Listen: Stop, Look, Listen.**

**Stop:** You are either on task or off task.

**Look:** Nonverbal messages:

Play a major role in all communication

The primary role in expressing emotions/feelings

**Listen**: Listen for key points and details as you adapt

your listening style: people, action, content, time.

* **Calm your partner by appropriately paraphrasing.**

Mentally summarize what you hear

Verbally summarize what you hear

Ask if you understand them correctly

Paraphrase feelings: “So you may be feeling . . . right?”

* Ask them to describe the problem in chronological order.
* Don’t interrupt. Use the power of the pause.
* Look for ways to be positive.
* **Use “I” language or extended “I” language**.

**“I” Language:** “I feel X when I see Y. I would prefer Z.”

**Extended “I” Language:**

“I care about you and our relationship.

I value our positive relationship.

I feel X when I see Y. I would prefer Z.”

Adapted from: Steven A. Beebe, Susan J. Beebe and Mark V. Redmond, *Interpersonal Communication: Relating to Others* 10th edition (New York: Pearson, 2025).

**Positive Messages to Use During Conflict**

* Apologize when appropriate: Admit when you made or are making a mistake; own responsibility for your part of the problem.
* Get credit for being a good listener.

Display an affirming nod in agreement.

Empathize: “So you are feeling . . .”

Paraphrase appropriately.

* Use appropriately affirming nonverbal messages.

Smile appropriately and monitor your expression.

Monitor your fingers and toes.

Have appropriate eye contact.

* Find something to say “yes” to such as “I agree this is a problem.”
* Look for opportunities to say something positive about what someone said.

“Good point.”

“Fair enough.”

“I can agree with that.”

Adapted from: Gottman & Gottman *Fight Right* (Harmony: New York, 2024).

**Step Three: Manage Goals**

* Identify your interests and your positions.

**Interest: The *general* outcome you seek to achieve;**

**the overall goal.**

“I want to relax and have fun.”

“I want a proposal that is accepted by the client.”

“I want our employees to be motivated to do their best.”

“I want more time to myself.”

**Position: What you *specifically* propose to happen;**

**the specific request and proposal presented.**

“I want to go to Washington D. C. for our vacation.”

“I want the cover of our proposal to be red.”

“I want the policy to include these punishments.”

“I want to take a 30-minute walk when I come home from work.”

* Ask questions to identify your partner’s interests (general goals) and positions (specific proposals/requests)?
* Determine where your interests (general goals) and your partner’s interests overlap.
* Identify several positions that could help achieve the common interests.

**Step Four: Manage the Problem**

**Problem: Something (a position and/or interest) you want more or less of.**[[2]](#footnote-2)

* **Use principled negotiation strategies.**

**(*Getting to Yes!* Fisher and Ury):**

* + **Separate the people from the problem**.
  + **Focus on shared interests (not positions**).
  + **Generate** **many options**.
  + **Base decisions on** **objective criteria**.
* **Use a problem-solving structure as a discussion agenda.**
  + Define: What is the problem?

(What do we want more of/less of)?

* + Analyze: What is the history? What are the causes?

What are the symptoms?

* + Identify common interests.
  + Identify criteria: Standards for a good outcome.
  + Generate several options/positions to achieve interests.
  + Expand the “pie” by identifying other resources.
  + Evaluate options (pros and cons) based on criteria.
  + Make a decision based on criteria, that satisfies the interests and is an acceptable position.

Steven A. Beebe and John T. Masterson, *Communicating in Small Groups: Principles and Practices* 13th edition (New York: Pearson, 2025).

**Three Types of Conflict**

|  | Pseudo-Conflict  Misunderstanding | Simple Conflict  Disagree on the Outcome | Ego Conflict  Conflict Is Personal |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Source of Conflict | **Individuals misunderstand each other’s perceptions of a problem** | **Disagreement over a course of action, idea, policy, or procedure** | **Defense of ego: Individual believe they are being attacked personally** |
| Managing Conflict | 1. Ask for clarification of perceptions.  2. Establish a supportive rather than a defensive climate. (No hot buttons pushed)  3. Employ active listening:  • Stop  • Look  • Listen  • Question  • Paraphrase content  • Paraphrase feelings | 1. Listen and clarify perceptions.  2. Make sure issues are clear to all group members.  3. Use a problem-solving approach to manage differences of opinion.  4. Keep the discussion focused on the issues and interests.  5. Use agreed upon facts rather than opinions as evidence.  6. Look for alternatives or compromise positions.  7. Determine which conflicts are the most important to resolve.  8. If necessary, postpone the decision while additional research is conducted. This delay also helps relieve tensions. | 1. Let members express their concerns, but do not permit personal attacks.  2. Employ active listening.  3. Call for a cooling-off period to manage emotions.  4. Try to keep the discussion focused on issues (simple conflict).  5. Encourage parties to be descriptive (“I” language) rather than evaluative and judgmental.  6. Use a problem-solving approach to manage differences of opinion.  7. Speak slowly and calmly.  8. Agree to disagree. |

How to Empathize

■ **Stop:** Turn off your own competing internal chatter and set aside your own needs. Socially decenter by considering the other person’s thoughts, feelings, values, culture, and perspective. Stop making arguments and concentrate on your partner’s points.

■ **Look:** Maintain positive eye contact. Look for emotional cues in your partner’s face; observe posture and gestures to gauge the intensity of the feelings being expressed.

■ **Listen:** Pause. Just listen. Focus on the overall story your partner is telling. Listen both for the details and for the main points; also listen for tone of voice. Try to identify your partner’s goal or bottom line.

■ **Imagine:** Imagine how you would feel if you were in your partner’s place. Imagine how your partner has felt under similar circumstances.

■ **Question:** If you need more information about what your partner has experienced or more clarification about something you do not understand, gently ask appropriate questions.

■ **Paraphrase:** To confirm your understanding of your partner’s point of view, briefly summarize the essence of what you think your partner is thinking or feeling.

Adapted from: Steven A. Beebe, Susan J. Beebe and Mark V. Redmond, *Interpersonal Communication: Relating to Others* 10th edition (New York: Pearson, 2025).

Perceived Gender Differences in Responding to Conflict

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| People with Feminine Styles Tend to: | People with Masculine Styles Tend to: |
| Communicate to establish ***rapport*** (develop a personal relationship).  Listen to Relate.  Be concerned with equity and caring; they connect with and feel responsible to others. | Communicate to ***report*** (relayinformation, advice or recommendations).    Listen to “fix it.”  Be concerned with equality of rights and fairness; they adhere to principles and rules. |
| Seek closeness and interdependence. | Seek to achieve specific goals. |
| Attend to interpersonal dynamics to assess the relationship’s health. | Be less aware of interpersonal dynamics but focus on the goal. |
| Encourage mutual involvement. | Protect self-interest. |
| Respond to conflict by often focusing mainly on the relationship. | Respond to conflict by often focusing on rules and being evasive until a unilateral decision is reached. |

Summary: Skills for Managing Conflict

Focus on the Person

Manage Emotions

* Use self-talk
* Be mindful: Label the emotion
* Breathe
* Draw upon mental, physical & spiritual sources of support.

Manage Communication

* Stop
* Look
* Listen
* Empathize
* Paraphrase
* Use “I” messages or extended “I” messages
* Pause

Focus on the Problem

Manage the Goal

* Identify the overall general outcome (interests).
* Identify what you/they want to have happen (specific position).
* Identify where goals/positions/interests overlap; Identify common ground.

Manage the Problem

* Use a problem-solving agenda (define, analyze, generate options)
* Use criteria: Identify standards for success.
* Generate many options.
* Evaluate options based on criteria.

Strategies for Managing Conflict Online

■ **Move to a Richer Medium**

If possible, talk to your communication partner in person; if talking face to face is not possible, reach for the phone to talk in real time rather than asynchronously.

■ **Make Sure You Understand the Issues Before Responding**

Before you write or say anything further, reread the previous messages. Are you sure you understand? Ask for clarification. Identify interests (the general outcome) and positions (the specific proposal).

■ **Paraphrase More**

Paraphrase first to yourself, and then to the other person, what you understand your partner to be communicating. Start a message by briefly summarizing what you understand their position is, and how their perceptions are different from yours. Ask if your perceptions are accurate.

■ **Increase Redundancy**

To ensure you are being “listened to,” repeat your key points and summarize what you’d like to have happen. Slow the process down.

■ **Use Caution When Trying to Lighten the Tone**

In face-to-face contexts, humor can help break the tension. But online, where there are limited non-verbal cues, what you think might reduce tension could escalate it.

■ **Avoid flaming (EXAGERATING! OVERSTATING!!! ATTACKING!!!) and Counterflaming; Take Time to Cool Off**

Your first impulse may be to respond immediately with a reciprocal flaming message. Don’t. Pause. Don’t respond or send a message immediately.

■ **Self-Reflect**

Take a “time out” to analyze your emotional reactions. Understanding why you have become upset can help you understand how to begin managing the conflict.

■ **Put Yourself in the Other Person’s Position**

After considering the other person’s thought process, empathize by asking yourself, “How would I feel if I perceived these same issues from my partner’s perspective?”

**What Will I Do To Increase My Communication Confidence?**

1. What will I do to better **manage emotions** during when someone pushes my “hot button”?

(Review pages 10-11)

1. How will I **improve my ability to communicate** during difficult conversations?

(Review pages 12-13)

1. How will I better **manage the goals** (interests/positions) during conflict and difficult conversations?

(Review page 14)

1. How will I more skillfully **manage the problem** (what I want more of or less of) during conflict and difficult conversations?

(Review page 15)

2/17/25

1. Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I thank my friend and colleague Dr. Dennis Romig for the definition of a problem. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)