

# Active Listening

*“If I were to summarize in one sentence the single most important principle I have learned in the field of interpersonal relations, it would be this: **Seek first to understand, then to be understood.** This principle is the key to effective interpersonal communication.”*

**Stephen R. Covey**, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, 1990.

Active listening involves paying attention to the speaker’s total communication, including nonverbal communication, feelings and content. It requires interpreting the message and providing responses and questions to show you understand and that you are interested.

## ***Four Step Model for Active Listening***

1. **Stay focused on the speaker.** Use encouraging responses and nonverbals.
2. **Ask questions to clarify** or get more information.
3. **Paraphrase and reflect** what you think the other person meant to say (reflecting content and feelings). Remain neutral.
4. **Get feedback.** Ask the speaker if your interpretation is accurate.

### ***Step 1: Stay Focused on the Speaker***

Use verbal and nonverbal cues to let the speaker know you are focused on what he or she is saying.

Say “I see,” or “uh huh.”

Nonverbally nod your head, maintain eye contact.

Work hard to stay focused and not let your mind wander onto other topics. Do not think about what you are going to say next. Don’t let your emotions get in the way of your listening. Stay neutral and non-judgmental.

### ***Step 2: Ask Questions to Clarify***

In active listening, the purpose of asking questions is to *clarify* your understanding of what is being said.

The types of questions to use for clarification include:

**Open-ended:** A question that will take a few sentences to answer. This kind of question expands the discussion.

*Example:* What caused the problem?

*Use open ended questions to start the discussion or to expand it.*

**Probing:** Encourages elaboration on what has already been said.

*Example:* When you discussed the problem with Prof. Jeffers, what did he see as the cause?

*Probing questions can help focus the discussion in a particular area.*

Remember in active listening you are trying to get a clear understanding of what the other person is trying to communicate. You are not trying to get your own ideas across, lead the discussion, blame or judge.

**Close-ended:** Requires a specific, shorter response, often “yes” or “no.”

*Example:* Do you mean the problem has been going on for a month?

*You can use close-ended questions to help end discussion or to move the discussion along.*

**Use of silence:** Sometimes just remaining silent will cause the speaker to continue and expand upon a thought.

### ***Step 3: Paraphrase What You Understood the Other Person to Say (include both content and feelings)***

The third step in the active listening process is to reflect what the speaker has said to you, including both content and feelings. This means you have to read between the lines and pay attention to nonverbal cues, as well as the verbal content. Try to understand the real meaning of what is being said. Use phrases like:

“So what you are telling me is...”

“My understanding is...”

“I get the impression you’re upset because...”

### ***Step 4: Get Feedback***

The last step in the active listening model is getting feedback. This lets you know if you really understand what the speaker is trying to communicate. You have to ASK if your understanding is correct. Don’t skip this step, because without verifying your understanding, you may miss the point entirely.

*Example:* “So what you are saying is that you feel your service workload is greater than that of your peers, and that you would like to be relieved of participation on two committees. Is my understanding correct?”

### ***Conflict***

Using active listening can be the first step towards conflict resolution. Often when someone is communicating about a conflict situation, the most important thing they need is to be heard and acknowledged for their point of view. By actively listening, paraphrasing and reflecting back both feelings and content, you are acknowledging and validating the other person’s viewpoint. This is the starting point for conflict resolution.

# Bridging Departmental Divides

***LEAD National Leadership Workshop for SEM Department Chairs UW ADVANCE Center for Institutional Change July 9-10, 2007 University of Washington, Seattle <http://www.engr.washington.edu/lead/PostedMaterials>***

*Information compiled from presentations given by Professors Michael Brown, Barbara Wakimoto, Mani Soma, Mimi Kahn, and Ken Clatterbaugh at previous ADVANCE and LCVI/ADVANCE Quarterly Leadership Workshops. See [www.engr.washington.edu/advance/workshops](http://www.engr.washington.edu/advance/workshops) for the original presentations.*

Consider the following hypothetical worst-case department which has excellent people who won't work together. In this department there is a lack of trust and respect. Faculty have difficulty identifying with institutional goals and have a "tit for tat" mentality. Dialogue tends to focus on departmental history (circa 1957) rather than the future of the department. Conversations are prone to conspiracy theories and have a victim mentality. The "inside-the-box" thinking perpetuates the status quo. Unsupported "conventional wisdom" claims are frequently made. Some of the consequences of this environment is new faculty become conditioned by the environment. Those that might bring new perspectives to the department self-select out. Shared implicit beliefs are reinforced and the environment is not suitable to fostering participation by underrepresented groups. What is a chair to do?!

## **What a chair can do**

- Create an environment where positive behavior is more probable
- Persist, realizing that change is (surprisingly) hard and permanent change will not happen instantly
- Promote open and transparent processes
- Identify and tackle long-festering issues. Prioritize these issues and consider the timing
- Take care in staffing key departmental committees because the right person can make a world of difference
- Present a framework for dealing with the issue at hand and a desired timeline for your faculty
- Recognize that people are the key
- Communicate clearly and openly
  - Take your message one-on-one, avoid email
  - Use neutral ground
  - Allow time for processing
  - Seek the opinions of all involved, not just the "inner circle"
  - Emphasize the importance of respecting all opinions
  - Use your influence to make certain that individuals are not marginalized in the process – remember that the chair sets an example and a tone in meetings

- ⇒ Offer unrequested assistance. Break cycle of “what incentive is there for me to help”
- ⇒ Have message of institutional goals
- ⇒ Use different strategies for different faculty types (e.g. too interested, disinterested, too busy)
- ⇒ Remember that open communication and flexibility of the leader are key
- ⇒ Don't rush a vote until all stake-holders have had ample opportunity to participate
  - Consider different sides of the issue
- ⇒ Find someone who thinks differently
- ⇒ Present all aspects fairly (think of as many as you can)
- ⇒ Minority views inform the process and lead to significant revision
  - Discuss ideas, suggestions, disagreement, etc. based on the issue, not on personality
  - Listen and be willing to change/modify
  - Remember it's sometimes better to be collegial than to be right
  - Foresee problems before they erupt ... a problem is brewing if individuals come to you and complain about colleagues, conversations occur behind closed doors, and/or colleagues are being marginalized
  - Focus on the positive and collaborative
  - Remind individuals of their common interests
  - No matter what size boat you are rowing, everyone has to pull together
  - Model the behavior you want others to adopt
  - Design ways for people to learn about one another
  - Prepare to “fall on your sword”
- ⇒ A chair's enthusiasm may not always carry a battle
- ⇒ Sometimes better to back off a divisive issue
- ⇒ In the end, people want their leaders to lead.

# Managing Conflict Strategically

## J. Michael Chennault

J. Michael Chennault is the Ombudsman for the University of California Irvine. He is also the Director of the Mediation Program that serves both the campus and UCI-Medical Center. Michael holds a B.A. Degree in Psychology from San Diego State University, a M.S. Degree in Counseling from San Diego State University and a M.A. degree in Educational Psychology from the University of California, Los Angeles. Michael is a California State Certified Mediator with professional certifications in mediation and negotiation from the Pepperdine School of Law and the Center for Dispute Resolution. He has been with the University for more than twenty-one years which is the foundation for his extensive knowledge of the university system.

## Yolanda T. Moses

Dr. Yolanda T. Moses- Moses currently serves as Professor of Anthropology, Associate Vice Chancellor for Excellence & Diversity, and Executive Director for Conflict Resolution at the University of California, Riverside. Dr. Moses' research focuses on the broad question of the origins of social inequality in complex societies through the use of comparative ethnographic and survey methods. She has explored gender and class disparities in the Caribbean, East Africa and in the United States. More recently, her research has focused on issues of diversity and change in universities and colleges in the United States, India, and South Africa.

She is currently involved with several national higher education projects with the National Council for Research on Women, Campus Women Lead and The Women of Color Research Collective. In addition, she is Chair of the National Advisory Board of a multi-year national public education project sponsored by the American Anthropological Association and funded by NSF and the Ford Foundation on Race and Human Variation. See [understandingrace.org](http://understandingrace.org). She is the co-author of the book: *How Real is Race: A Sourcebook on Race, Culture and Biology*. (2007) Rowman and Littlefield.



# Managing Conflict Strategically

	PRODUCTIVE	COUNTER PRODUCTIVE
• ACTIVE	Collaboration + Avoidance	Competition
• PASSIVE	+Accommodate Compromise	- Accommodate - Avoidance

# Responses to Conflict

To effectively manage conflict we need to:

- Be self-aware.
- Actively listen.
- Delay reacting.
- Think beyond our individual interests.
- Be adaptive.

# Behavioral Approaches to Conflict

- **Avoidance**
- **Accommodation**
- **Competition**
- **Compromise**
- **Collaboration**

# Behavioral Approaches to Conflict Defined

- **Avoiding**-*preferring* to not deal with the issue.
- **Accommodating**-having a low value on meeting your own interests with a higher value placed on meeting the interests of others. (giving in)
- **Competing**-high value placed on satisfying your own interests while placing a low value on the interests of others. (I win you lose)

# Behavioral Approaches to Conflict Defined

- **Compromising**-when the value is on equal gain and equal loss. (splitting the difference)
- **Collaborating**-when high value is placed on meeting the interests and needs of *everyone* concerned. (seeking a win-win or mutual gain outcome)

# Strategic Applications

- Conflict is complicated and elusive. How we respond to it, depends on our *approach* and the *tools* that we have at our disposal.
- Each behavioral approach to conflict depends on what outcomes you are seeking and the **value** that you place on the relationships in the process.

# Applications

## + Avoidance

- When tensions are high or to regain composure.
- When others can resolve the conflict more effectively.
- When the costs outweigh the benefits.
- When there are power differentials.
- When the need to gather information outweighs the need to make an immediate decision.

## - Avoidance

- Not stopping negative behaviors.
- Not confronting difficult matters as they arise.
- Not holding colleagues accountable to established rules or protocols.
- Not making a timely decision.

# Applications

## **+Accommodating**

- When the issue is more important to others.
- To preserve harmony or to avoid disruption.
- To let others learn from their mistakes or choices.

## **-Accommodating**

- When one gives up too much of what they value for the sake of harmony. (degree of sacrifice)
- Some questions to ponder for the +/- of accommodating.
- 1. What value do I put on the outcome of this conflict?
- 2. What value do I put on the relationship with the other person?
- 3. How do I balance the two issues?

# Applications

## **+Compromising**

- When goals are moderately important.
- When colleagues with equal power are strongly committed to mutually exclusive goals.
- To achieve a temporary settlement of complex issues.
- To arrive at expedient solutions under the pressure of time.
- When collaboration fails.

## **-Compromising**

- When mutual gain and mutual loss is beyond the 50/50 rule.

# Applications

## +Collaboration

- When the objective is to *learn*.
- To *merge* insights from different perspectives.
- When a *team* effort is required.
- To *end* conflict rather than table it.
- When *creative* solutions are needed or to stimulate *fresh* thinking.
- To *work* through hard feelings.
- To *gain* commitment by consensual decision making.

## -Collaboration

- Involves more time than the other behavioral approaches to conflict

# Applications

## +Competition

- When people compete against the problem and not each other.
- Identifying what aspects of competitive behavior increase the value of the department.
- Competing against *what* diminishes relationships *when* colleagues compete against each other.

## -Competition

- When the objective is to win at all costs.