



It's Time for Ethical Communication

Eric Giordano, Ph.D., Executive Director, Wisconsin Institute for Public Policy and Service, University of Wisconsin System

I have been asked by the editors of *The Municipality* to write a series of articles on the topic of conflict management. I will begin by introducing a strategy known as *Ethical Communication* which is an effective collaborative approach to resolving interpersonal conflict.¹ Because ethical communication is an interactive process, I would like you to imagine for a moment that we are having a conversation. To get us started, I will present a set of thought questions that mirror the steps of the model (see Figure 1 below).

Figure 1. Six Steps of Ethical Communication

Problem Definition	Understanding & Choice	Solution
<p>1. Actively Listen</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What is the problem? - My view/your view - How do we feel (sad, angry, scared, etc.)? <p>2. Identify Concerns</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What if no change? - What concerns us? - What is greatest fear? 	<p>3. Assert Needs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What do I want? - What do you want? - What would that look like? <p>4. Share Values</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Why do we want that (freedom, security, power, relationship, etc.)? 	<p>5. Make Decisions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What is best outcome? - What can we live with? - What are we willing to do to achieve it? <p>6. Plan Actions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Who will do what, when, where, and how?

Thought Question #1. When was the last time you faced a troubling interpersonal conflict and how did it make you feel? Whether the result of incompatible goals, scarce resources, or opposing viewpoints, conflict is endemic to human relationships. Personally, I deal with conflict nearly every day at work, at home, and beyond. I usually get through it without serious negative consequences. Occasionally, I bump up against a person or situation that confounds my best efforts. This can lead to a range of emotions, including sadness (when I am disconnected from people I care about); anxiety (when conflict interrupts my routine); indignity (when someone disrespects

me); anger (when someone says or does something hurtful); confusion (when conflict arises unexpectedly); and justification (when karma repays a bad actor); among many more – mostly negative and unproductive – feelings. Yet, according to numerous research studies, when conflict is well managed, it actually has the potential to create positive outcomes, including rewarding and satisfactory relationships.² This leads to a pertinent hypothesis: The problem isn't conflict – the problem is poorly managed conflict.³

Thought Question #2. What concerns you about conflict? What kinds of conflict and conflict outcomes do you most fear? I am concerned that conflict will damage relationships that are important to me. I also worry about the toxic effects of interpersonal conflict in the workplace. It doesn't help that our brains are wired in ways that sometimes exacerbate disagreements. For example, we are prone to motivated reasoning and confirmation bias which cause us to become entrenched in our viewpoints, no matter how objectively accurate or inaccurate they are. We are motivated to support positions we already hold, decisions we have already made, and groups to which we are already devoted. The bigger the potential threat to the things we care deeply about, the more self-protective our brains become.⁴ This intensifies interpersonal and intergroup conflict and leads to what I actually fear most: escalatory conflict that pits individuals and groups against one another in emotion-laden, highly antagonistic relationships characterized by disdain for opposing viewpoints; incivility; prejudicial decision-making; and the erosion of trust in public institutions, including local government.

Thought Question #3. We know what we *don't* want, but what is it that we *do* want? What can we do to reduce the negative outcomes of conflict in our homes, our workplace, and the public square? I would like to see public officials develop and use conflict management skills and tools and serve as change agents in their organizations to build and sustain a culture of conflict management. This high-minded vision is not extraordinary or even unreachable. We can scarcely find a trade magazine or scholarly journal that doesn't publish recurring

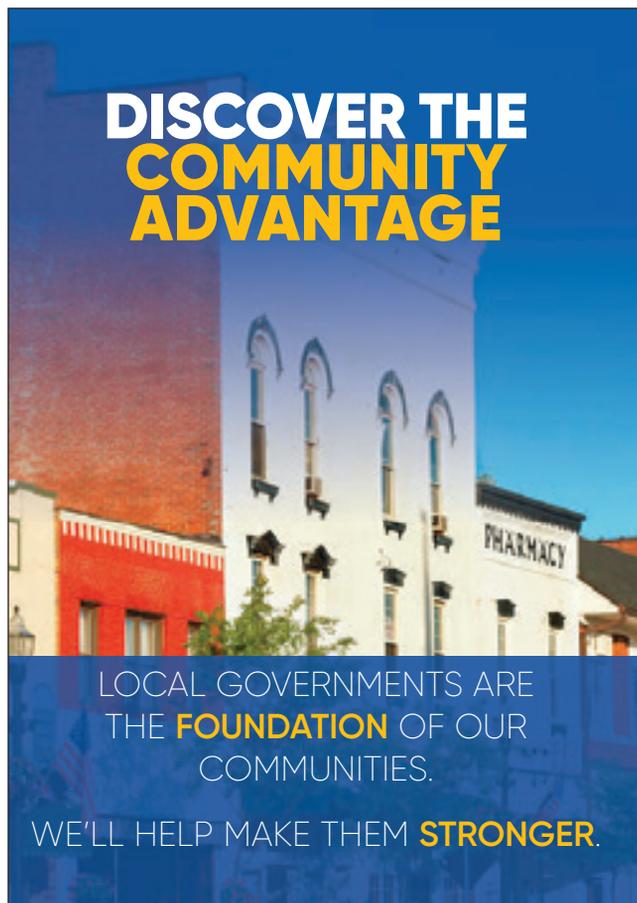
articles on conflict management principles, tips, skills, and tools. Researchers and practitioners agree that managing conflict, at its core, is about engaging effectively in difficult conversations. However, leaders and citizens alike appear to be retreating from, rather than embracing, principles of effective communication. I would like to see us reverse that trend.

Thought Question #4. Why does effective conflict management matter and why should we encourage public leaders and representatives to learn and implement relevant principles, skills, and tools? Improving competence and confidence in dealing with conflict can yield positive effects in the real world such as healthier relationships, better morale, increased productivity, decreased frequency and intensity of conflict, and greater trust among people. In a governance context, building capacity for conflict management can help restore the notion that we are working toward the collective good, as opposed to privileging one group over another. I have had multiple conversations recently with career civil servants and elected officials who have lamented how far removed we are from the days when political rivals could come together to negotiate in good faith; jointly advocate policies; or socialize

in the local watering hole. While it is naïve to imagine the past as all rainbows and sunshine, we seem to have crossed the River Styx to a dark place with no clear path of return. We see intense conflict encroaching into city, village, and county meetings, school board meetings, and in a variety of other community settings. Although the divides are not strictly ideological, the tone and tenor of our disagreements have escalated in unhealthy ways, reinforced by our respective “preference bubbles,” “information cocoons,” and “echo chambers.”

Thought Question #5. What can we do to build personal and organizational capacity for conflict management? There are five basic strategies: avoidance, accommodation, competition, compromise, and collaboration.⁵ While specific circumstances favor each, only a collaborative approach explores shared values; repairs and strengthens relationships; and seeks win-win solutions. It is also the only strategy that does not avoid, repress, control, surrender, postpone, or potentially sow seeds for future conflict. You may have already learned about effective interpersonal communication tools such as courageous conversations or crucial conversations, which share

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important collaborative principles. However, I prefer the term “ethical communication” because it reminds us that well-designed processes encourage the best in ourselves and others. The “ethical” part of collaborative problem-solving can be summed up by the following characteristics:

- Beneficence (desires good for all parties and does no harm)
- Empathy (encourages awareness and understanding of others’ feelings)
- Fairness (promotes just, equitable, and balanced solutions)
- Agency (allows freedom to choose)
- Integrity/Honesty (seeks out and adheres to truth)
- Respect (listens to and recognizes others’ viewpoints)

Thought Question #6. What is our plan going forward? What does ethical communication look like in practical terms and how do we implement it in our interpersonal relationships? As mentioned previously, ethical communication has six steps:

1. Actively listen to identify the problem and how we feel about it
2. Share our concerns if the problem is not addressed
3. Assert our wants and needs
4. Explain why our needs are valuable to us
5. Propose and negotiate joint decisions
6. Plan and implement appropriate actions

These steps are designed as joint actions that put us on a pathway to resolving conflict. Collectively they create a safe space to understand new perspectives, consider alternative evidence, and discard negative emotions without being blamed, losing face, or giving up what is valued most. The process

of ethical communication isn’t always quick and easy, nor does it work to resolve conflict in every instance. But it helps to humanize those with whom we disagree. It allows us to recognize our respective concerns and feelings, and to value each other as individuals, even if we don’t see eye to eye. It is ethical because it allows us to break down stereotypes, remove false dichotomies (and the false choices that they present), expand opportunities for changing behavior, and repair and strengthen relationships.

As a next step, I propose that we invest in formal training and coaching using an ethical approach to interpersonal communication. This is particularly important because we spend most of our lives being unconsciously trained not to speak ethically to one another. In addition, we have barely scratched the surface here and have yet to address a number of critical topics such as conditions that favor ethical communication versus other approaches; personal preparation and techniques to maximize effectiveness; and how to build on this approach to address intergroup conflict; among others.

Thanks for engaging in this brief ethical “conversation” and I look forward to continuing our journey toward effective conflict management.

Contact Eric at egiordano@uwsa.edu

Editor’s Note: Eric will be writing a quarterly column as part of the new resource the League and League Mutual are providing to League members in partnership with the Wisconsin Institute for Public Policy and Service (WIPPS). To learn more, refer to the article “New League Conflict Management Resource” in the League’s June 2020 *The Municipality* and see the League’s website <https://www.lwm-info.org/1592/11985/Conflict-Management>

1. The primary text underlying research and practice of ethical communication is based on the work of William Glasser in his 1998 book, *Choice Theory: A New Psychology of Personal Freedom*.

2. See, for example, D.J. Canary and Susan J. Messman, “Relationship Conflict,” in *Close Relationships: A Sourcebook*, eds. Clyde Hendrick and Susan S. Hendrick (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2000), 261-70; Jonathan Bundy, Ryan M. Vogel, and Miles A. Zachary, “Organization-stakeholder fit: A dynamic theory of cooperation, compromise, and conflict between an organization and its stakeholders,” *Strategic Management Journal* 39, no. 2 (February 2018): 476-501; and Jane. E. Dutton and Belle. R. Ragins, eds. *LEA’s organization and management series. Exploring positive relationships at work: Building a theoretical and research foundation* (New York: Psychology Press, 2007), 137-158.

3. Abdul Ghaffar, “Conflict in Schools: Its Causes & Management Strategies,” *Journal of Managerial Sciences* 3, no. 2 (2009): 213.

4. Cordelia Fine, *A Mind of Its Own: How Your Brain Distorts and Deceives* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006), 8.

5. Kenneth W. Thomas and Ralph H. Kilmann, *The Thomas-Kilman Conflict Mode Instrument* (Mountain View, CA: CPP, Inc., 1974).

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