



Book Review: Communication for Constructive Workplace Conflict

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ABSTRACT

In the book, *Communication for Constructive Workplace Conflict*, Jessica Jameson (Professor and Head of the Department of Communication at North Carolina State University), draws upon her decades of research on workplace conflict, her experiences providing mediation services to university employees, and a vast body of interdisciplinary research and theory to craft a useful, well-supported model for constructive workplace communication. The book deftly bridges theory to practice through case studies, scenarios, vignettes, and descriptions of the author's research studies that illustrate each chapter's theory-driven content. Readers will find models, recommendations, and activities that are useful for conflict training, conflict coaching, mediation, and more.

KEYWORDS

Ombudsman, communication, listening, collaborative problem-solving, team dynamics



BOOK REVIEW: COMMUNICATION FOR CONSTRUCTIVE WORKPLACE CONFLICT

The book's author draws upon decades of her research on workplace conflict, her experiences providing mediation services to university employees, and a vast body of research in conflict resolution and negotiation, organizational communication, intercultural communication, organizational psychology and more to craft a useful, well-supported model for constructive workplace communication. Using the acronym L-E-A-R-N, Jameson (2003) delineates concepts and practices for listening, engaging, acknowledging, rapport-building, and nurturing to build healthy conflict cultures in teams and organizations and foster effective conflict management among individuals.

I'll start this review with an overview of the book and then delve into the L-E-A-R-N model; identifying areas that are particularly relevant to training, conflict coaching, and mediation. In the final section, I will share ideas about how Ombuds might utilize this book in their practice.

BOOK OVERVIEW

The book starts with the theoretical framework that underpins the L-E-A-R-N model. I should admit that I, like the author, am an Organizational Communication scholar. This is, in fact, what drew me to read the book. While this chapter is not necessary for understanding the model, it does ground readers in the central role that our daily interactions play in our beliefs about conflict, in how conflict is created and managed, as well as how our social environment is constructed through communication.

After the theoretical framework chapter, the book is organized into five units, one for each concept in the model: Learn, Engage, Acknowledge, Rapport(building), and Nurture. Each unit consists of two chapters that all end with chapter summary, an activity for engaging with the concepts, and a list of references. This consistent structure is valuable to those who may wish to refer back to specific content.

One of the most helpful and enjoyable aspects of this book is that it bridges theory to practice through case studies, scenarios, vignettes, and descriptions of the author's research studies that illustrate each chapter's theory-driven content. An Ombuds practice is always enriched by contemplating different scenarios and conflict dynamics, but even more so when guided by a framework for analyzing and navigating the complexities of these dynamics.

UNIT 1: LISTEN

As Ombuds, active listening skills are the heart and soul of our work. The two chapters in this unit provide a deep and nuanced understanding of different types and typologies of listening, the challenges to effective listening, and listening as reflective practice.

The first chapter in this unit, *Challenges to Effective Listening*, delineates how biases, identity, time, solution orientation, and processing time can make it hard to accurately understand what another person is saying, particularly when in conflict. The second chapter, *Listening as Reflective Practice*, first provides concepts for *listening to ourselves*, a critical first step prior to trying to understand others. Self-awareness, self-monitoring, suspending judgement, emotional regulation, and maintaining curiosity and openness are the presented practices that support "reflection-in-action" (Schön, 1983, as cited in Jameson, 2023). The next section, *Listening to Understand Others*, delineates effective practices for the type of listening that requires us to "engage in higher levels of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral complexity" (Kugler & Coleman, 2020, as cited in Jameson, 2023).

I have been facilitating active listening workshops for many years, yet I still found new and useful concepts and approaches in these chapters that I will integrate into my work. For example, many of us are familiar with the concept of active listening as *listening to understand*. Jameson (2023)



introduces the concept of *generative listening* (Scharmer, 2007), which goes beyond understanding and entails “listening to help imagine a different future” (p. 24). I imagine the power of this concept in late stages of mediation when the parties have (ideally) gained new understanding and perspective and the mediator asks “Now, what is possible?”

UNIT 2: ENGAGE

This unit explores the reasons and the ways that individuals do or do not engage in conflict. The first chapter in the unit explores how the interrelated dynamics of power, identity, and emotion can create obstacles to effectively engaging in conflict. The chapter also points to the importance of organizational culture and its role in informing how employees feel about conflict, what it means, and how it should be addressed. The second chapter moves from the obstacles to engaging in conflict to the models for effective conflict engagement. The content in this chapter will be familiar to most Ombuds with its focus on collaborative problem-solving, the dynamics of organizational dissent, and the tools that change conflict conversations from adversarial to collaborative.

UNIT 3: ACKNOWLEDGE

This unit (and the next) shifts focus from engaging in conflict to creating a team and organizational culture where employees feel a sense of belonging and will be more apt to voice dissent and engage effectively in conflict. This first chapter in the unit focuses on individual communication theories and strategies for promoting a sense of belonging, while the second chapter delineates team dynamics that support a culture for engaging effectively with differences. The concepts and content from this unit would be particularly helpful to Ombuds who are working with teams to improve their dynamics and decision-making processes.

UNIT 4: RAPPORT (BUILDING)

This unit focuses on research and concepts that foster good rapport and trust building. Good rapport refers to a harmonious relationship characterized by good will, mutual understanding, and empathy. However, the author helpfully shares a model of trust that indicates that good rapport is a foundation of trust, but does not guarantee trust because trust also entails confidence that someone will do what they say they will do and that their actions align with their words. A quote from this unit that I particularly appreciated states that trust is “the amalgamation of a series of interactions and events over time that result in more or less trust” (p. 153). This conceptualization aligns with what many of us see when we engage in conflict coaching or mediation and the issues presented are part of an ongoing series of interactions that contribute to the current situation, both directly and indirectly. Topics covered in this unit include rapport-building communication practices, the complexities of rapport-building in intercultural relationships, forgiveness, and apologies; all of which are very relevant to Ombuds when engaging in conflict coaching.

UNIT 5: NURTURE

The final unit talks about the importance of nurturing an organizational culture that effectively engages with conflict. The first chapter in the unit explores conflict management system designs. Ombuds are part of such systems and may already have a firm understanding of this topic. Nevertheless, reading about conflict management systems in various organizations may provide new ideas for how Ombuds may support their organization’s efforts at creating channels and processes for addressing conflicts.

The final chapter examines the myriad of ways that conflict and collaboration both occur through online modalities. The content is more relevant than ever in our current context of remote work and reliance on asynchronous and virtual communication tools. The author outlines the uses and



pitfalls of various online communication tools and provides recommendations that Ombuds may find useful for helping to identify the roots of a conflict as well as conflict remediation ideas.

CONCLUSION

Although this book is heavily rooted in theory and research, the writing and structure make it easy and engaging to read. The author consistently illustrates throughout that the concepts in the L-E-A-R-N model are all interrelated and mutually reinforcing, not discrete steps in a process. And yet, each unit provides content (models, case studies, activities) that could be used for a training, conflict coaching, or mediation.

For those who have not had the benefit of academic instruction in conflict, organizational behavior/culture, communication, and team dynamics, this book will expose you to many relevant theories and models that will deepen your knowledge, understanding, and practice.

And finally, for those with a desire to teach, this book could be used to build an entire course.



REFERENCES

Jameson, J. K. (2023). *Communication for Constructive Workplace Conflict*. John Wiley & Sons.



AUTHOR BIO

Marlo Goldstein Hode currently serves as the Director of Conflict Resolution & Mediation Services for the University of Missouri St. Louis' Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. She has a doctorate in Organizational Communication, an LLM in Dispute Resolution, an MA in Intercultural Communication, a BA in Communication, and a Certificate in Workplace Mediation. She is the co-author of DEI 2.0 – A Toolkit for Building Your Own Online Diversity Course. She also has several publications in peer-reviewed journals and book chapters on various topics including sexual harassment, neurodiversity, racial issues on campus, and the effectiveness of online professional development courses. (marlo@umsl.edu)