



# The Art of Intercultural Communication for Ombuds to Manage Conflict

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## ABSTRACT

The book *Conflict Management and Intercultural Communication: The Art of Intercultural Harmony* begins with a sober reminder that managing conflict and communication is hard work. This is especially true as the world becomes more complex, where authentic dialogue is needed to cultivate harmony in the spaces where people operate to resolve conflicts across [intercultural] differences. As the world continues to become more complex, the authors of this book argue that intercultural communication is one fundamental approach to resolving conflict in the interdependent, globalized world in which we live. I provide a critical overview of the book and key takeaways that Ombuds can use to manage conflict in the workplace.

## KEYWORDS

Ombuds, conflict management, intercultural harmony, dialogue

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author is grateful to Dr. Shannon Lynn Burton, the *JIOA* Editor, for providing a copy of *Conflict Management and Intercultural Communication* for his review.



## INTRODUCTION

In this book review, I provide a critical lens of how ombudspersons can apply to mediate conflicts across cultures through *Conflict Management and Intercultural Communication: The Art of Intercultural Harmony*—the editors for this book, Drs. Xiaodong Dai and Guo-Ming Chen (2023) argue that intercultural conflict occurs when people's expectations, values, norms, interests, or goals are often out of alignment. The notion of misalignment between what is being communicated and what is being heard is the central thesis of this book. To resolve conflict through a framework, Dai and Chen conceptualize using intercultural harmony—by giving full attention to listening to differing perspectives—as a starting point for people to come together in dialogues to co-create meanings rather than debates vying for their positions. This is the essence of intercultural harmony Ombuds can work toward facilitating a space of listening and understanding differing perspectives.

The book is organized into two major sections. The first section shares multiple perspectives on conflict management and harmony building. A key theme throughout the first section of the 12 chapters is how dialogue is essential in bridging differences before and after conflicts arise (Broome's contribution, chapter 1). More specifically, a dialogic approach can bridge differences and cultivate all voices (and perspectives) to be heard (and seen) and understood in resolving conflicts across cultures (Jia & Jia, chapter 2).

The first section collates Western and Eastern philosophies—i.e., design thinking through diversity, equity, and inclusion and balancing the yin and yang in face-saving—ultimately cultivating intercultural competence. For example, yin and yang is an Eastern approach to resolving conflicts while maintaining harmony (or balance) between the positive and negative effects of going through life experiences among people with differing opinions. In the case of conflict management, this book reminds readers that diverse perspectives are crucial to gaining a broader understanding of how people communicate through conflicts and communicate more broadly. Scholars (e.g., Broome, chapter 1) specifically highlight that the role of dialogue in bridging differences, confrontations, or arguments is to focus on harmony to build an environment of embracing perspectives.

The second section, across chapters 13 to 20, further contextualizes the intercultural conflict management and harmony-building that needs to occur through intergenerational, intercultural, interpersonal, and transnational in-person and virtual spaces. In particular, the central theme for the second section explores relational management (or *guanxi*, translated from Mandarin as relationship) as a pragmatic approach to managing conflict while maintaining harmonious relationships. For example, when a dispute arises between two people when they confront each other or vie for their argument or positions to win, that often leads to unresolved harm.

## HOW WILL THIS APPLY CRITICALLY TO THE OMBUDS' WORK

First, conflict management through intercultural communication is grounded in dialogues (Broome, chapter 1; Jia and Jia, chapter 2). Broome explains that dialogue strives for co-learning to listen to differing perspectives. Meanwhile, Jia and Jia share that a dialogic approach is vital to working across differences, especially when people live more interdependently.

Second, conflict management from an organizational perspective intersects with the diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) framework in managing conflicts (Buzzanell, chapter 3; Dai, chapter 4). Buzzanell provides examples of the DEI framework centering on diverse human-to-human interactions to cultivate empathy in the communication process. Dai further suggests that the communication process is part and parcel of interculturality development across different cultures to better understand each other before taking joint action in resolving conflicts.

Third, “honoring face” or maintaining individual dignity is crucial to resolving conflict through intercultural communication (Haslett, chapter 5; Ting-Toomey, chapter 6). Ting-Toomey provides an evolutionary perspective of the Eastern concept of “face” or “face-negotiation” to acknowledge how conflict management is not necessarily argumentative but rather to maintain one’s dignity when resolving the conflict through harmonizing. Put plainly, resolving conflict is to find ways to work together rather than finding flaws to dissent against one another. Thus, face negotiation is mindful of maintaining individual personhood’s dignity (or face) before negotiating in conflicts.

Fourthly, six critical practice elements are helpful for ombuds in mediation or conflict negotiations through an intercultural competence process (Sorrells, chapter 7). That is, to inquire, to frame, to position, to dialogue, to reflect, and to act. Sorrells further explained that the six elements of the negotiation process are grounded in a nonviolent approach and cultivate reconciliation between parties in conflict. Yet, there are nuances in how each context works differently in conflict management (Kim & Kameo, chapter 8; Miyahara, chapter 9; Chen, chapter 10). I agree with Kim and Kameo’s approach to acknowledging the importance of conflict management: reading the air (*ku’uki wo yomu* in Japanese) to learn where conflict is rooted. Additionally, I resonate with Chen’s sensitivity to the undertone of the arising conflict and mending relationships as a collective whole between two persons in conflict rather than two separate individuals getting separate resolutions (e.g., the balance of yin and yang).

Looking forward into virtual spaces, conflict management strategies are much more distinct from in-person contexts—as there are differences in verbal and nonverbal cues (Ping Yang, in chapter 20). What is missing and much needed for resolving conflicts in virtual spaces is to be more mindful of people’s moods, emotions, attitudes, and opinions, allowing time to process them intentionally and slowly. Ping Yang cautions that mediators must be more sensitive when starting the tone from a space of cooperation as there is a lack of body language in virtual spaces.

## CONCLUSION

Conflict management through intercultural communication is complex because contexts are sometimes only shown on the surface (e.g., save face) without us being aware. While Dai and Chen highlight diverse frameworks (i.e., DEI) that Ombuds can benefit from in their practice in this book, there are complex ways to resolve conflicts. Looking into the future, I hope the next edition can continue to expand on the nuance of conflict management, such as through intergroup dialogue in bringing people together to work across differences (e.g., Gurin et al., 2013). Applying Gurin et al.’s evidence-based intergroup dialogue—a sustained multi-partial dialogic approach of sharing multiple perspectives—may balance peoples’ perspectives more equitably in managing conflicts. This is especially helpful for Ombudspersons to be adequately equipped to handle conflicts as the landscape of conflict management is becoming more complex globally.



## REFERENCES

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