

In Chapter 7, “**The Engines of Positive Relationships Across Difference: Conflict and Learning**” from *Exploring Positive Relationships at Work*, edited by Jane E. Dutton and Belle Ragins, co-authors Martin N. Davidson and Erika Hayes James look at diversity among coworkers. The authors point out that building positive relationships across differences in organizations requires conflict as well as learning.

In the United States, members of different social groups come together in a professional context and must collaborate effectively to accomplish organizational tasks. How can individuals bridge the gaps that divide them and work toward a common goal? Social identity group membership can cause cultural, historical, and political power dynamics.

The authors use social identity theory to describe individual experience that forms a variety of associations. Biases and prejudice can affect our perceptions of others. For example, we tend to be more attracted to persons who are similar to us, and more suspicious of persons who are dissimilar to us. In other words, we all have expectations of each other based on personal characteristics. Further, when those expectations are not realized, conflict can occur.

Conflict is explored as something positive in a high-quality relationship that can result in learning rather than disengagement. Individuals from diverse identity groups are likely to experience conflict related to their difference, and they can sever their connection or they can make it stronger by addressing the tension.

Learning begins with curiosity and an open mind, and can result in a change in attitude or behaviors. With more information, one can move beyond stereotypes and gain insight about others. Rather than having superficial exchanges, colleagues can have mutually supportive interaction.

The chapter attributes a learning perspective to certain competencies. One skill is an awareness of the emotions that arise during conflict. Negative feelings must be examined in order to learn from them. Another skill is giving and receiving feedback. When communication is honest, it can be constructive.

Although there are strong relationships across difference that endure, the authors argue that they are extremely rare. It is easiest to maintain connections among those who share common identities. But the challenge of this chapter is to present a model of high quality relationships that cross diverse backgrounds. The chapter also points out that as we work in an increasingly global context, it is vital to our success to reach out to others.

For information on purchasing the book Exploring Positive Relationships at Work, please contact Martin at <http://www.leveragingdifference.com/contact/>