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Journal of Business Communication 2003; 40; 144

DOI: 10.1177/002194360304000203

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The Term “Win-Win” in Conflict Management: A Classic Case of Misuse and Overuse

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Words evolve in their usage and meaning over time, but few words in the business language have changed as much as the term “win-win.” Once confined to the literature on conflict management, the term has been co-opted in the trade press and often used incorrectly in place of the term “compromise.” This etymological study traces the lineage of the term from its appearance in the academic literature in the 1970s to its proliferation in the trade press beginning in the early 1980s. Two interpretative errors are described and the effects of these errors on the meaning of the term are detailed.

In the children’s fairy tale, “Through the Looking Glass,” Humpty Dumpty tells Alice, “When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.” And so it goes with the jargon of business, creating different definitions to suit its needs. Thus, what we speak may not be actually what we mean, creating a situation that, at best, confuses the sincere listener and, at worst, obscures reality. One particular example of a chameleon business term is “win-win,” which first appeared in the literature in the 1970s. While words evolve in their usage and meaning, the term “win-win” has had a particularly unusual evolution. Indeed, over time “win-win” has been co-opted to the point that in its current usage the term now means nearly the opposite of its original

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definition, thus causing the term to lose its linguistic impact. Since 20% of a manager's time is spent managing conflict (De Dreu et al., 2001), presence in communication is imperative.

The present commentary traces the lineage "win-win" from its appearance in the academic literature in the 1970s to its proliferation in the trade press beginning in the early 1980s. Two interpretative errors, the Wissman Paradox and the Green Conundrum, are described and the effects of these errors on the meaning of the term are detailed.

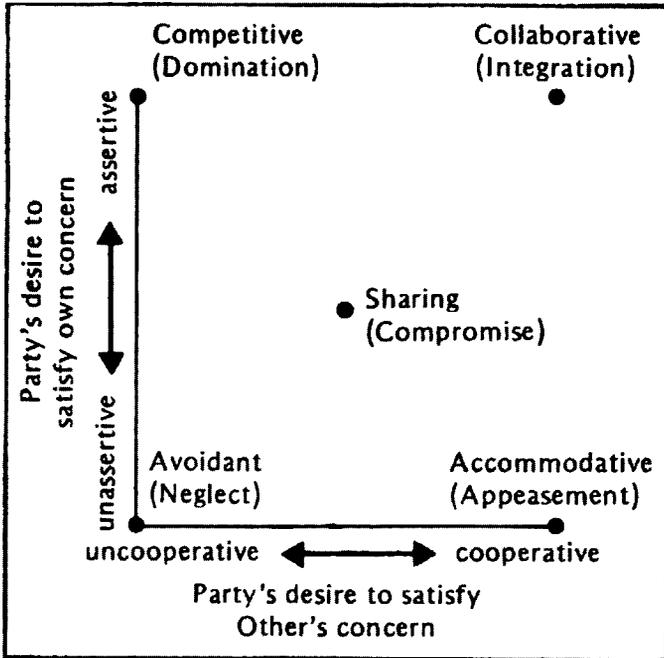
Historical Roots and Lineage "Win-Win"

Conflict management is most often examined as a dyadic process between individuals or groups of individuals that is cyclical in nature without intervention (Pondy, 1967; Walton, 1969). Various diagnostic models using idiosyncratic terminology have been advanced to explain conflict management. One of the most researched diagnostic models is the Process Model, which outlines steps or events that occur during a conflict episode. The stages of the Process Model include frustration, conceptualization of issues, triggering event(s) that lead to some behavior, interaction, and aftermath or consequences (Pondy, 1967; Walton, 1969). In addition, the concept of "win-win" fits into three areas: conceptualization, behavior, and interaction.

Conceptualization refers to the cognitive processes of defining conflict (e.g., magnitude, stakes, boundaries) as well as the perception of alternatives and their outcomes, which are limited in number and often idiosyncratic to the situation and the parties involved. From this, the behaviors and interactions ensue. Thomas (1976, p. 900), expanding on the seminal work of Galtung (1965) as well as Blake and Mouton (1964) and Blake et al. (1964), projected five conflict management styles on a graphic "joint outcome space" that frame the general alternatives in the interaction stage as noted in Figure 1.

The Competitive and Accommodative styles represent "either-or," "win-lose," or "fixed-sum" scenarios that use either domination or appeasement as their primary behaviors. Both styles are representative of distributive bargaining situations in which the positions of the conflicting parties are mutually exclusive (Blake, Shepard, & Mouton, 1964), and thus, "there is pure competition for some limited value" (Walton & McKersie, 1965, p. 4) or a perceived "economics of scarcity" (Blake et al., 1964, p. 45). The Avoidant style, characterized by neglectful behavior, represents a stalemate or a situation that cannot be resolved. The Sharing style, which uses compromise as its primary behavior, represents a "zero-sum" situation that allows for some degree of satisfaction for all parties. However, gains in satisfaction (and thus, decreased frustration) on the part of one party is due to a loss of satisfaction (and thus, increased frustration) to the other party (Follett, 1926).

Figure 1.
Thomas' Joint Outcome Space of Conflict Management Styles



Thomas, K. W. (1976). Conflict and conflict management. In M. D. Dunnette (Ed). *The handbook of industrial and organizational psychology* (p. 900). New York: John Wiley & Sons.

The Collaborative style, with its attendant integrative behavior, represents an open or undetermined situation or what Walton and McKersie (1965) refer to as a "varying-sum" outcome where both parties may gain if the issue of conflict is not phrased in a distributive (i.e., either-or/win-lose) manner. In fact, redefining the issue as integrative can allow for both parties' concerns to be met through exploration (Walton & McKersie, 1965). Yet, the Collaborative or Integrative approach is difficult to achieve. More often than not it seems impossible to have all parties completely satisfied once alternatives are established and interaction occurs. As such, any departure from the Collaborative style represents movement towards one of the other conflict management patterns (Thomas, 1976).

Of particular interest is that the Collaborative or Integrative style of behavior requires that all parties cooperate fully and participate actively to satisfy their concerns with mutually beneficial outcomes (Blake et al., 1964) or what Werther and Wehrich (1975) refer to as a "positive-sum" outcome. Furthermore, successful collaboration requires a different

approach to conflict management, including re-patterning of entrenched habits, a positive outlook, motivation, honest sharing of information, and trust (Follett, 1926; Walton, 1970; Walton & McKersie, 1965). According to Blake et al. (1964), the steps for collaborative problem-solving are: define the problem, review the problem fully, develop a range of alternatives, search for solutions, explore and evaluate the solutions, and weigh and choose the alternative solutions (pp. 90-93). Though these steps can be modified, the critical factor that must be present is that the work is done "jointly," not separately (Blake et al., 1964, p. 93).

The Collaborative style should not be equated with the absence of conflict. Indeed, collaboration may not be completely harmonious (Walton & McKersie, 1965); instead, the style attempts to be as non-adversarial as possible. Confrontation, where "the parties directly engage each other and focus on the conflict between them" (Walton, 1969, p. 6), is not avoided. However, the outcome is achieved differently than the other conflict-management behavior patterns by being focused on joint problem-solving (Blake et al., 1964). Moreover, as noted by Follett (1926, p. 118), only an integrative agreement represents an authentic, "stabilizing" resolution of an issue, because it is the only resolution that leaves no residual frustration that might cause a recurrence of the issue.¹

Evolution of "Win-Win"

Analysis of the conflict management literature reveals that the trade press has changed how we define and use the "collaborative" and "integrative" terms. As discussed previously, the terms collaborative or integrative historically referred to the mutual satisfaction and outcome of parties in conflict. Thus, it is important to observe that the original meanings of the terms "collaborative" or "integrative" are NOT synonymous with the term "win-win," which is used to denote that both parties "win" in a conflict episode. Yet, the terms are often used interchangeably. As the next discussion will illustrate, the type of literature where these terms are used and the literature's popularity have slowly and dramatically changed these terms' usage over time.

Type of Literature

One profound change has been in the type of literature that refers to the term "win-win." The development of the conflict management jargon was once confined to academic journals. The initial articles using "win-win" distinguished between short-term negotiations that result in compromise or lose-lose/win-lose outcomes and long-term problem-solving that requires integration, cooperation, and synergy. These early articles were theoretical in nature, proposing the positives of a "win-win" model while recognizing its complexity, realizing the difficulty in repatterning current business practices, and questioning this model's viability in practice

(Labovitz, 1980; Lasagna, 1973; Morano, 1976; Thomas, 1977). However, by the early 1980s, the trade press dominated the use of the term. This literature routinely used "win-win" as if it were a realistic, viable alternative that was proven to exist. Unfortunately, such prescriptions were made without empirical or theoretical support.

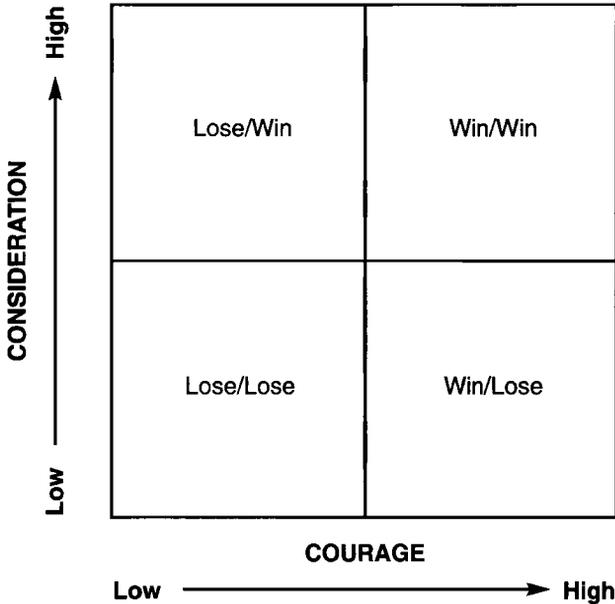
The sheer number of publications has greatly popularized the incorrect use of term. For example, much of the landmark work on conflict-management that mentioned the term "win-win" occurred in the 1960s. However, a search of the ABI Inform database shows that "win-win" was used in 9 articles in the 1970s, 108 articles in the 1980s, and 1064 articles in the 1990s. Other databases also reveal an escalation in the use of the term.²

Influential Works

Two popular press books in particular have had a profound effect on the use of "win-win." The first, *Getting To Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In* (Fisher & Ury, 1981), is an extension (and to some degree, a repetition) of the early landmark work in conflict management. For example, Fisher and Ury focus on "dovetailing" interests, rather than positions, to create "mutual gains" (p. 76) that will result in a better resolution of a conflict, a concept that relates to Follett's (1926) integrative stance. Further, Fisher and Ury (p. 101) discuss the concept of BATNA (Best Alternative to a Negotiated Agreement) which resembles Blake et al.'s (1965, p. 97) "least common denominator agreement," which is an agreement created from the parts common to both negotiating parties. Despite the similarities to other earlier published works, *Getting To Yes* did a great deal to place conflict resolution in the mainstream press, and mutual gains bargaining remains an important topic in the conflict management literature (Kochan & Osterman, 1994). Consider the text *The Mutual Gains Enterprise: Forging a Winning Partnership among Labor, Management, and Government*. Writing at a macro level, the authors advocate government policy deployment to create "win-win" or mutual gains between management and labor. While not prescriptive, the book does present a number of case studies to stress its major points.

The second popular press book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (Covey, 1989), uses "win-win" throughout and incorporates the term as one of the "habits." Covey defines "win-win" as belief in a synergistic "third" solution that the two parties develop together that allows both to have some mutual benefit with both feeling good about the outcome (p. 207). Covey goes on to state that situations are "interdependent" realities, and as such "win-win is the only viable alternative" in his "paradigms of human interaction" (p. 211). In describing this personal change philosophy, there are several critical issues that Covey changes or introduces that fundamentally alter the application of the conflict management literature. First, as noted in Figure 2, in comparing Covey's "outcome space" to the

Figure 2.
Covey's Paradigms of Human Interaction



Covey, S. R. (1989). *The 7 habits of highly effective people*. New York: A Fireside Book, p. 218.

original "outcome space" in Figure 1, Covey uses quadrants rather than a series of five points. Using quadrants enlarges the area of a given conflict management behavior. The quadrants are re-labeled with the outcomes of "human interactions" (e.g., lose/lose, win/lose, lose/win, win/win), rather than the style or behavior used in a conflict episode.

Second, the Sharing or Compromise Style, represented by a point in the center of the original outcome space in Figure 1, has been eliminated in Covey's "outcome space." Covey states that compromise is a "low form of win-win" (pp. 215-216), once again allowing for maneuverability within the upper right quadrant that a single fixed point does not. Third, the invention of the concept of "No Deal" is another critical change. Although not expressly represented by the Paradigms of Human Interaction quadrant, "No Deal" is an important potential outcome of the diagram. Covey considers "No Deal" a "higher expression" (p. 213) of "win-win," which means that both parties agree to walk away with no hard feelings if mutual gain or win-win is not evident in a solution. Covey's work has been immensely popular, and as such, no single other work has done as much to place "win-win" in the mainstream press.

Interpretive Errors

Interpretive errors have occurred as a result of the introduction of the term “win-win” in place of the terms “integrative” or “collaborative.” Two terms have been developed to describe the most common errors: the Wissman Paradox and the Green Conundrum. Both interpretive errors are described in detail below.

Wissman Paradox

The Wissman Paradox posits that “win-win” is an illusion and one of two situations exists: no conflict exists or some form of compromise exists. Let’s first examine no existing conflict. The use of “win” suggests that there is some form of competition or conflict. Yet, much of the literature has co-opted the “win-win” term to mean a form of participative decision-making where multiple stakeholders gain, but where there is not necessarily a competition or conflict. In this interpretive error, no conflict episode exists, yet, the situation is presented as “win-win.” Examples of this type of interpretive error abound in the literature. Walter (1996) presents the solicitation of employees’ ideas as “win-win”: “Suggestion programs create a win-win situation—more involvement and input for employees, improved efficiency and cost-savings for employers” (p. 24). Similarly, Myron and Truax (1996, p. 6B) propose the “Cause-related Marketing: Good For You, Good For the World” model for describing how well chosen cause-related ad campaigns can be “mutually gratifying” by increasing revenues while also “creat[ing] a beneficial outcome for all.” In “Accounting Internships: A Win-Win Arrangement,” McCombs and VanSyckle (1994, pp. 21-23) detail the benefits of internships. For students, there is a “contribution to an individual’s accounting education” where they are “gaining maturity” and “learning valuable lessons.” Organizational advantages include extra help to fill employment needs, improved public relations, lower costs than regular employees, and the ability to train before hiring.

The forgoing examples illustrate the interpretive error of the Wissman Paradox regarding the lack of conflict. Simply stated, no conflict exists in the situations described. In the article on employee suggestions, if employees want to participate and it benefits the company—there is no conflict. In the article on advertising, if the employees or the customers don’t mind being associated with a given cause—there is no conflict. In the article on internships, if students want to participate and it benefits the participating organizations—there is no conflict. Although it can be said that these situations denote teamwork, cooperation, or a sharing of vision, it is irrelevant that both parties wanted the same thing for differing reasons. Thus, the situations are not “win-win” because of the absence of conflict, and hence, the term “win-win” does not apply.

Let us now consider the second possibility in which some form of compromise has occurred. We live in a world of scarce resources. In most conflict episodes, neither party gains all that each wants, and thus compromise is usually involved. The term compromise means that both parties make concessions. Thus, in this particular interpretive error, a conflict episode exists, but the situation is presented as "win-win" when there is actually some form of compromise involved. Numerous examples of this type of interpretive exist in the literature. In their article "Win-Win Contract at Inland Steel," Cimini and Behrmann (1993) explain concessions made by both sides in negotiating the "precedent setting" collective bargaining agreement. In the pact, the union gained more "job security and more participation in the company's decision-making process in exchange for a longer term contract, a reduced work force, and the elimination of certain restrictive work rules" (p. 74). Concessions on other work issues including pensions, healthcare, and labor organizing are also discussed. The settlement of a lawsuit between Father Flanagan's Boys' Home (Boys Town) and the American Institute for Philanthropy (API) is detailed in an article titled, "A Win-Win Settlement" (1996, p. 5). The settlement came after the District judge termed the suit unnecessary. In the settlement, the libel suit was dismissed, but the resulting agreement "benefited both parties" in that it had the following provisions: "API retains its right to use its rating system and Boys Town gets a chance to explain its position." The article notes that the joint statement issued from Boys Town and the API "tiptoed around the major areas of disagreement" and that the groups still have "legitimate philosophical differences."

The examples presented for describing the interpretive error of the Wissman Paradox regard some form of compromise. In the labor negotiation, the article uses the term "exchange" in describing the process of reaching a settlement, which is termed "bargaining" and thus, denotes a give and take process that is used in compromise. The article on the legal settlement states that both sides avoided the issue that brought on the confrontation in the first place. It is irrelevant that both parties wanted the same thing for differing reasons. Clearly, these situations represent compromise in that the negotiations were not completely non-adversarial in nature and because there was not a complete resolution of the issues. The articles describe situations involving a conflict episode that result in compromise where the authors label the outcome as being "win-win."

Also relevant to the Wissman Paradox is using "win-win" and "compromise" interchangeably. Miller (1989) discusses guidelines managers can follow to create "a win-win situation" with their employees. The second guideline states that we should "be prepared to compromise." Since the Compromise and Integrative stances are mutually exclusive, using the terms interchangeably adds to the confusion.

Green Conundrum

The Green Conundrum posits that all stakeholders in a conflict management situation are not taken into consideration. While the immediate parties may feel like “winners,” the stakeholders in the larger systems may be losers. The Green Conundrum states that there is a loser in every conflict management situation involving more than two parties, and the conundrum is to discover the loser. Specifically, the Green Conundrum addresses situations such as strategic alliances, including mergers, partnerships, joint ventures, licensing agreements, and technology transfers. In general, alliances are touted as increasing the competitive edge of the organizations involved. The Green Conundrum forces us to look beyond the immediate parties to the larger set of stakeholders involved, and in doing so expands the conflict management literature, which primarily focuses on dyadic conflict situations.

Examples of this type of interpretive error abound in the literature. A *Harvard Business Review* (Andreasen, 1996, p. 47) article discusses the “win-win” alliance between American Express and the hunger-relief organization Share Our Strength. The case is made describing alliances in cause-related marketing where the nonprofit organization enhances revenues and the for-profit organization enhances its image. Similarly, *The Sloan Management Review* (Frey & Schlosser, 1993) details the “win-win” alliance between Asea Brown Boveri (ABB) and Ford Motor Company on Ford’s Oakville paint-finishing project. Such examples illustrate the interpretive error of the Green Conundrum. The benefits to the individual organizations involved in the alliances are not in question. However, the situations presented are not fully “win-win” because they do not account for the larger system of stakeholders. In the marketing example, there are multiple hunger-relief organizations that would have liked to have had an alliance with a large corporate name such as American Express. Additionally, there are other credit card companies, such as Visa, Mastercard, and Discover, who were left out in forming this particular alliance, and thus, are potential losers in the alliance. In the industrial example, other companies that provide DCS (Distributed Control Systems), such as Honeywell, Foxboro, and Bailey, are the losers in the alliance between ABB and Ford. Furthermore, the alliance excludes many other automakers who might benefit from a similar alliance with ABB. Again, the point of the Green Conundrum is to look beyond the immediate parties to the larger system of stakeholders.

To summarize, the interpretive errors involving the Wissman Paradox and the Green Conundrum are prevalent in the literature. In a sample of 60 articles randomly chosen from the last 10 years using the search word “win-win,” 52 articles (87%) contained at least one of these interpretive errors. Let us now examine the effects of morphing of “win-win.”

Effects of Morphing

The morphing of the term "win-win" from the original meaning of "integrative" or "collaborative" has had many effects, including distortion, conflict denial, business speak, loss of flexibility, and reality denial. These effects are presented next.

Distortion of the Outcome Space

Covey's treatment of the matter bears some analysis in light of the previous research we examined. Regarding Covey's reconceptualization (see Figure 2) of the original outcome space shown in Figure 1, it appears that the Collaborative style (the upper right point) has simply been re-labeled with "win-win" now sitting opposite of "lose-lose" (the lower left point). Furthermore, the original "outcome space" was enlarged when Covey (1989, p. 218) redrew it using quadrants, giving the false impression that there is room to move within the quadrant to achieve a given outcome. As already noted, the early literature on conflict literature used single points, thus rendering the conflict management situation less variable and less attainable than that of Covey's vision.

Regarding the inclusion of "No Deal," it appears that the only difference between "No Deal" and "Lose-Lose" is that in the former, the final resulting relationship is not viewed as adversarial, which overlooks that a failed negotiation can lead to less than positive feelings. Interestingly, in explaining the concept of "No Deal," Covey describes a situation where family members pick a completely different activity if one cannot be agreed on (p. 214). In keeping with the spirit of "win-win," no one is allowed to feel good at the expense of another. However, if everyone is equally miserable with the alternative activity, then the outcome is viewed as a "No Deal" or a higher form of "win-win." Such an approach represents the "destroy the village in order to save it" mentality.

After the publication of Covey's book and his platform as editor of the magazine, *Executive Excellence*, the literature fundamentally shifted in the use of "win-win." Regrettably, much of the literature incorporated Covey's flawed interpretation of the "win-win" term. Though loaded with personal examples and twice-told tales, Covey's model provided no empirical research as support, and many of his concepts are, in fact, contradictory to the extant research on conflict management.

Denial of Conflict

Walton (1969) noted that the great number of interdependencies in an organization make conflict inevitable. Indeed, De Dreu et al. (2001) estimated that 20% of a manager's time is spent on conflict management. The chronic misuse of the term "win-win" can have a negative impact. Most importantly, such misuse can deny that real conflict exists and the neces-

sity to deal with potentially non-constructive conflict (Lobel, 1994). Imagine an example in which to achieve required cost containment, an organization announces that a "win-win" solution means to increase the premiums for employees. The ostensible "win" for the organization is that they are still in business; the ostensible "win" for the employees is that they still have a job with insurance. But the announcement could leave the employees confused because they do not feel that they have "won" anything when their insurance premiums go up. The solution is not a collaborative or integrative stance worked on together, but at worst, a decision forced upon employees or at best, a compromise characterized by a "splitting of differences" (Blake et al., 1964, p. 76) on a given issue.

Claiming something is "win-win" when, in fact, it is not is misleading. In effect, this approach suggests that a situation is resolved, when it is not. In addition, such an approach also carries the message of "don't push the issue anymore." This type of orientation is dangerous to the conflict management process in that it denies the reality of the situation, ignores power relationships, is manipulative, creates hidden agendas, and could actually inhibit creative collaboration that could more effectively resolve the issue.

Business Speak

Jargon that does not add clarity is another negative effect. Amazingly, the morphing of "win-win" has largely gone unnoticed. One of the rare exceptions is Graham's (1993, p. 152) article, "A Glossary of Business B.S.," where the author defines "win-win":

This has been elevated to a near-sacred position in the pantheon of today's business vocabulary. And because we have heard the words so many times, we assume they are true. In a "win/win" situation, one person convinces another that what's being proposed is terrific for both. Just saying the words "win/win" makes a deal fair for everyone. Wrong. Common sense tells us that no situation is equally good for all parties involved. One winner always comes away with a bigger piece of the pie. Count on it.

Lobel (1994) has also questioned the morphing of the term "win-win" to mean more than it can mean realistically in bargaining situations.

Interestingly, at the same time the meaning of "win-win" was being morphed in injurious ways, the conflict approach itself spawned new words. For example, consider the term "coopetition." Coopetition is a neologism for a strategy combining cooperation and competition in which former competitors combine resources for a greater competitive edge. The term should not be confused with mixed bargaining during which a combination of distributive and integrative strategies are used in a conflict episode. In the later case, cooperation is utilized only "to enlarge the area of interdependency" (Walton & McKersie, 1965, p. 167). Rather, the term

"coopetition" is based on game-theory, which posits that helping your competitor win can also help you win (Brandenburger & Nalebuff, 1995). The conceptual change has not gone unnoticed. Whereas the alliances discussed earlier between organizations in differing industries are of little concern, coopetition, which involves organizations in the same or very similar industries, is of great concern because of antitrust laws or the appearance of "market-rigging" (*Management Today*, 1996, pp. 3-4). A few examples of coopetition that have occurred in similar industries include Anheuser-Busch with Kirin of Japan and Packard Bell with NEC. Another instance of how "win-win" has created new terms is "Losing as Winning." The new term suggests a rather arcane interpretation that takes a situation involving losing and reinvents it as winning. In detailing the 1992 Olympic Games, Lyer (1992) suggests that although there were athletes who lost in their attempt to medal, all the athletes were winners for having tried. Lyer goes on to say, "The winners counted their medals last week, the losers counted their victories" (p. 53).

As the word-smithing around the term "win-win" increases, clarity decreases. Lobel (1994) cogently states, "Attaching words to the negotiation process will not change the basic nature of bargaining" (p. 778). New labels do not create a situation, no matter how badly we may want them to do so.

Loss of Flexibility

Another negative effect of morphing "win-win" is that it overlooks a long held tenet that effective handling of a wide range of situations comes from behavioral flexibility (Laszlo, 1973). Thus, most conflict management behaviors are valid, depending on the issue (Thomas, 1977). Indeed, Bulach (1991) determined that for collective bargaining, there is no one correct strategy to use. Reason suggests that well-rounded and successful managers (and all employees, for that matter) engage in many types of conflict strategies. Accordingly, some conflicts are best addressed by not using collaboration. For example, if time is critical in resolving a problem, managers may be forced to make a unilateral, non-collaborative decision. Further, simply because a collaborative stance is not utilized does not necessarily suggest that an adversarial stance is apparent.

Denial of Reality

Another negative effect of the chronic morphing of "win-win" is a denial that all issues are integrative in nature and can be collaboratively settled. To state otherwise is an illusion that creates unrealistic expectations and is naïve (Lobel, 1994; Walton, 1970, respectively). Furthermore, when the occasion demands dividing limited resources among would be competitors, often the best that can be achieved is compromise or sharing (Walton & McKersie, 1965). Clearly, compromise can be an effective

approach, but with the advent of "win-win," compromise has somehow become associated with having given in or given up on something. In today's vernacular to say that one has compromised is often tantamount to failure. Yet, this negative connotation overlooks the original definition of compromise, that is, a sharing of resources through some degree of cooperation. Compromise remains a viable conflict resolution approach (Thomas, 1976).

Simply put, the nature of some issues means that a mutually satisfactory resolution cannot always be achieved. Instead, there are instances when the best one can hope for is "the least bad decision" (Lobel, 1994) or the "least common denominator agreement" (Blake et al., 1965). For example, Lobel (1994, p. 775) cites health insurance coverage as an issue difficult to solve collaboratively. Perhaps on a considerably larger and more important stage, Walton and McKersie (1965) argue that the Cuban Missile Crisis was a situation that could not be solved collaboratively. Further, organizations should not be devoid of conflict (Blake & Mouton, 1964; Follett, 1926; Labovitz, 1980). The chronic morphing and misuse of "win-win" implies that conflict is somehow negative. To the contrary, Lobel (1994) states that the absence of conflict might be a sign of an unhealthy organization. Additionally, conflict can be constructive for organizations because it can lead, if handled constructively, to change, adaptation, and survival. The key, then, is to engage in techniques that allow individuals and organizations to handle conflict productively (Labovitz, 1980; Lobel, 1994).

Conclusion

Solomon's (1988) book, *The Signs of Our Time: The Secret Meanings of Everyday Life*, explores the science of semiotics to analyze a multitude of cultural artifacts that are in reality "signs," which whether they are words, or symbols, or objects, reveal hidden cultural beliefs. Thus, what you see is NOT what you get, and semiotics reveals how to think beyond the "thing" to the hidden "concept" (p. 13). The goal is to master these signs so we don't get "hoodwinked" (p. 10) or manipulated as cultural participants. Thus, recognition is key. The term "win-win" has become ingrained in our business communication lexicon, and its morphed use has hoodwinked many scholars and practitioners alike. Much of the trade literature now details "how to" steps for conflict management, primarily urging participants to think "win-win" or act in a "win-win" manner. Unfortunately, these well-meaning suggestions are simply recitations of similar writings that lack empirical support. Most notable is that there are few specifics on actually how these prescriptions can be achieved. Perhaps more importantly is the absence of research about the shift in how we understand "win-win." Scholars might consider some of the early research (Labovitz, 1980; Lasagna, 1973; Morano, 1976; Thomas, 1977) that called for innovative ways for thinking about conflict in an effort to

better understand this move toward changing the way we think about and use "win-win." Such research would allow conflict management scholars and practitioners to more critically evaluate the shift and provide greater clarity to the conflict management literature. For instance, research might go beyond the morphing of "win-win" to consider the politicization of the term "compromise."

Continuing on in Lewis Carroll's fairy tale, "Through the Looking Glass," Alice comments to Humpty Dumpty regarding the particular use of a word, "That's a great deal to make one word mean." Humpty Dumpty replies, "When I make a word do a lot of work like that, I always pay it extra." This repartee leaves the author to believe that the term "win-win" has been given a great burden to mean more than its original intent and thus, certainly must be among the richest of all words!

NOTES

1. Lobel (1994:771) notes that "win-win" also goes by other terms such as interest-based bargaining and mutual gain bargaining.

2. The proliferation of the "Win-Win" buzzword is by no means confined to the trade press. An escalation of the term also began to occur in the academic press in the 1980s and increased further throughout the 1990s, with many of the "A" journals using the term incorrectly.

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