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# Conflict Management Styles: The Start of Effective Conflict Management

10-13 minutes

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Conflict is part of life. Conflict is any situation in which people have incompatible interests, goals, principles or feelings and experience. In other words, conflict means that two people experience discomforting differences.

Despite our best efforts, we find ourselves in disagreements with other people in all aspects of our lives: at work, in our relationships, in our volunteer activities. How we respond to provocation can determine if conflict moves in a beneficial or a harmful direction. The good news is that we can learn skills, strategies and processes to manage conflict.

The goal of conflict management is to manage yourself and others so as to bring about the best possible resolution of a conflict situation in terms of the issue at hand, the relationship. When handled effectively, conflict carries with it opportunity:

**Better Relationships:**

Conflict is a signal that changes might be necessary in the relationships or the situation so conflict management can build relationships. It also encourages listening and taking the perspective of the other person for greater rapport.

### Better Outcomes:

Conflict stimulates problem-solving and open communication to arrive at better solutions.

### Less Stress:

Conflict provides a means for expressing emotions which can ultimately clear the air and reduce tension.

Let us examine the first step in becoming an effective conflict manager: knowing how to use the 5 conflict management styles and strategies.

## **Conflict Management Styles**

The start of being an effective conflict manager is being aware of your style in conflict and the style of those that you deal with.

These styles were identified by two psychologists, Kenneth Thomas and Ralph Kilmann in the 1970's to illustrate the options that we have in dealing with conflict.

There are 5 different styles for managing conflict. These are tendencies and we may use any one of these styles at different times. However, people tend to have one or two preferred or default ways of dealing with conflict.

### 1. Avoid

A person who avoids conflict does not deal the issue at hand when it arises. This means that neither his own concerns nor those of the other person are addressed. Avoiding might mean diplomatically sidestepping an issue, postponing an issue until a better time, or withdrawing from a threatening situation.

### 2. Accommodate

Someone who accommodates the other person in a conflict prefers

to satisfy the concerns of the other person, thereby neglecting his own concerns. Accommodation carries with it an element of self-sacrifice. This mode might involve selfless generosity or charity or yielding to another's point of view.

### 3. Compromise

The individual who prefers to compromise wants to find an expedient, mutually acceptable solution. Compromising addresses an issue more directly than avoiding, but does not explore it in as much depth as collaborating. Compromising might mean splitting the difference, exchanging concessions, or seeking a quick middle-ground position.

### 4. Collaborate

In collaboration, the individual prefers to work with the other person to find a solution that fully satisfies the concerns of both. This is the best way to achieve the win/win solution: one where each party feels that he or she achieved his or her goals. It involves exploring an issue to identify the underlying interests of the parties in order to arrive at an outcome that meets both sets of concerns.

Collaborating might take the form of exploring a disagreement to learn from each other's insights, or looking for a creative solution to an interpersonal problem.

### 5. Compete

An individual who competes pursues his or her own interests without regard to the other person's goals and seeking to impose his power in order to win his position. Competing might mean standing up for one's rights, defending a position believed to be right, or simply trying to win.

## **Conflict Management Strategies**

These styles translate into 5 different strategies for managing conflict which are based on 4 factors:

- **issues:** the extent to which the conflict involves important priorities, principles or values are involved in the conflict;
- **relationship:** the importance of maintaining a close, mutually supportive relationship with the other party;
- **relative power:** the power balance between you and the other party;
- **available time:** how much time you have to resolve the issue.

By knowing when to use each strategy, you can begin to make choices about which is the most appropriate to the situation.

Let us take a closer look at when to use each strategy:

#### 1. Avoid

Avoiding is an appropriate strategy where there is a clear advantage to waiting to resolve the conflict. When used as a choice, it helps to cool things down and reduce stress. Avoiding is appropriate when

- the conflict is small and relationships are at stake
- you are upset and need time to cool off
- there are more important issues to deal with
- you have no power and you see no chance of getting your concerns met
- you are too emotionally involved and others around you can solve the conflict more successfully.

However, if either the issue or the relationship between the parties is important, avoidance is a poor strategy because important decisions may be made by default and postponing resolution of the issue may make matters worse.

## 2. Accommodate

Accommodate is a good strategy when you find yourself in conflict over a fairly unimportant issue and you would like to resolve the conflict without straining your relationship with the other party.

Someone who accommodates builds good will and can be perceived as reasonable. Collaborating is also an option, but it might not be worth the time. The focus is on the relationship, as opposed to the outcome.

Accommodate is the right strategy when

- an issue is not as important to you as it is to the other person
- you realize you are wrong
- the time is not right to resolve the issue and you would prefer to simply build credit for the future
- harmony in the relationship is extremely important.

The downside is that your ideas do not get sufficient attention and may be neglected, causing you to feel resentful. Moreover, you may lose credibility and influence if accommodation becomes a pattern.

## 3. Compromise

When dealing with moderately important issues, compromising can often lead to quick solutions. However, compromise does not completely satisfy either party, and compromise does not foster innovation the way that taking the time to collaborate can.

Compromise helps to get to solutions and is good for overcoming impasses. It works when:

- people of relatively equal power are equally committed to goals
- you can save time by reaching intermediate resolution of parts of complex issues
- the goals are moderately important.

However, compromise can backfire if the parties overlook important principles and long-term goals for the sake of the details.

Moreover, it is not the best way to reach an optimal solution on important issues. The parties also risk engaging in excessive “horse-trading” while losing sight of the big picture.

#### 4. Collaborate

Conflict management experts advocate collaboration as the best way to resolve a conflict over important issues. The premise is that teamwork and cooperation help all parties to achieve their goals while also maintaining the relationships. The process of working through differences will lead to creative solutions that will satisfy both parties’ concerns. Collaboration is the way to achieve the best outcome on important issues as well as build good relationships since it takes into account all of the parties’ underlying interests.

Collaboration works best when:

- the parties trust each other
- it is important for all sides to buy into the outcome
- the people involved are willing to change their thinking as more information is found and new options are suggested
- the parties need to work through animosity and hard feelings.

The downside is that the process requires a lot of time and energy. If time is precious, compete or compromise might be a better solution.

#### 5. Compete

Compete is a useful strategy when the outcome is extremely important and an immediate decision needs to be taken. It is efficient and effective when you need to take a stand. In that case, one must sometimes use power to win. Compete is appropriate

when

- you know you are right
- time is short and a quick decision is needed
- you need to stand up for your rights.

However, when used too often, compete can escalate the conflict, breed resentment among others and damage relationships.

## **How to Use Conflict Management Strategies**

The first step in managing your conflicts is to be aware of your default style. Where has it worked for you? Where did it let you down? What were the consequences?

Once you know about the other styles and strategies, you can begin to apply them in the appropriate situation. The good news is that this is a skill that you can practice and eventually master.

In addition, once you know the different styles, you can identify them in the people with whom you are in conflict. This can help you to understand their perspective and frame the appropriate response.

By knowing the styles and how to use them effectively, you can begin to take charge of those uncomfortable conflict situations.

With these principles in mind, you are now ready for action. For more information, here is [how to prepare for a conflict meeting](#) and [conduct a conflict negotiation](#).

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