

DEALING WITH CONFLICT

What's Your Style?

OVERVIEW

Our greatest sources of inspiration and personal satisfaction come from love rather than hate, from moments of connection with others rather than times of aggression and opposition. Yet even while we are searching for insight and transformation or trying to rise above the fray, we find ourselves mired in petty squabbles and disputes that make our efforts to rise above them almost laughable.

Every conflict we face in life is rich with positive and negative potential. It can be a source of inspiration, enlightenment, learning, transformation, and growth—or of rage, fear, shame, entrapment, and resistance. The choice is not up to our opponents, but to us, and our willingness to face and work through them.

The German philosopher Nietzsche wrote: "When you look into the abyss, the abyss also looks into you. Looking into conflict means giving up your illusions, no longer seeing yourself as a victim or other people as enemies. It requires giving up your fear of engaging in honest communication with someone you distrust. By skillfully confronting your problems, entering into them and passing through to the other side, you can develop, grow, learn, and become more available to the people you value in your life.

The following pages contain descriptions of various manners of approaching conflict. None are "right" or "wrong"; rather some are more appropriate and effective for certain situations. However, many of us consciously or more likely, unconsciously, use one or a few over others, regardless of the circumstance.

STYLES OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Compromising ...

is intermediate in both assertiveness and cooperativeness. When compromising, the objective is to find an expedient, mutually acceptable solution that partially satisfies both parties. Compromising falls on a middle ground between competing and accommodating, giving up more than competing but less than accommodating. Likewise, it addresses an issue more directly than avoiding but doesn't explore it in as much depth as collaborating. Compromising might mean splitting the difference, exchanging concessions, or seeking a quick middle-ground position.

Avoiding ...

is unassertive and uncooperative. When avoiding, an individual does not immediately pursue his or her own concerns or those of the other person. He or she does not address the conflict. Avoiding might take the form of diplomatically side-stepping an issue, postponing an issue until a better time, or simply withdrawing from a threatening situation.

Accommodating ...

is unassertive and cooperative, the opposite of competing. When accommodating, an individual neglects (sometimes unconsciously) his or her own concerns to satisfy the concerns of the other person; there is a strong element of self-sacrifice in this mode. Accommodating might take the form of selfless generosity or charity, obeying another person's order when you would prefer not to, or yielding to another's point of view.

Collaborating ...

is both assertive and cooperative, the opposite of avoiding. When collaborating, an individual attempts to work with the other person to find a solution that fully satisfies the concerns or interests of both. It involves digging into an issue to identify the underlying concerns of the two individuals and to find an alternative that meets both sets of concerns, which inevitably takes time. Collaborating between two persons might take the form of exploring a disagreement to learn from each other's insights, resolving some condition that would otherwise have them competing for resources, or confronting and trying to find a creative solution to an interpersonal problem.

Competing ...

is assertive and uncooperative, a power-oriented mode used to force the issue. When competing, an individual pursues his or her own concerns at the other person's expense, using whatever power seems appropriate to win his or her position: the ability to argue, his or her rank, the possibility of economic sanctions, etc. Note that Competing might also mean standing up for your rights, defending a position you believe is correct, or simply trying to win because you enjoy winning.

COMPROMISING

When is it useful?

- ✓ When goals are moderately important, but not worth the effort or potential disruption of more assertive modes.
- ✓ When two opponents with equal power are strongly committed to mutually exclusive | goals—as in labor-management bargaining.
- ✓ To achieve temporary settlements to complex issues.
- ✓ To arrive at expedient solutions under time pressure.
- ✓ As a backup mode when collaboration or competition fails to be successful.

Questions to ask yourself:

1. Do you concentrate so heavily upon the practicalities and tactics of compromise that you sometimes lose sight of larger issues—principles, values, long-term objectives, and company welfare?
2. Does an emphasis on bargaining and trading create a cynical climate of gamesmanship? Such a climate might undermine interpersonal trust and deflect attention away from the merits of the issues discussed.
3. Do you find yourself too sensitive or embarrassed to be effective in bargaining situations?
4. Do you find it hard to make concessions?
5. Without this safety valve, you may have trouble getting gracefully out of mutually destructive arguments, power struggles, etc.

AVOIDING

When is it useful?

- ✓ When an issue is trivial, of only passing importance, or when other more important issues are take precedence.
- ✓ When you perceive no chance of satisfying your concerns, e.g., when you have low power or you are frustrated by something, which would be very difficult to change such as national policies, someone's personality structure, etc.
- ✓ When the potential damage of confronting a conflict outweighs the benefits of its resolution.
- ✓ To let people cool down and thus reduce tensions to a productive level and to regain perspective and composure.
- ✓ When gathering more information outweighs the advantages of an immediate decision.
- ✓ When others can resolve the conflict more effectively.
- ✓ When the issue seems symptomatic of another more basic issue.

Questions to ask yourself:

1. Does your coordination suffer because people have trouble getting your inputs on issues?
2. Does it often appear that people are "walking on eggshells?" Sometimes a dysfunctional amount of energy and time can be devoted to caution and the avoiding of issues, indicating that issues need to be faced and resolved.
3. Are decisions on important issues made by default?
4. Do you find yourself hurting people's feelings or stirring up hostilities? If yes, you may need to exercise more discretion in confronting issues or more tact in framing issues in nonthreatening ways. Tact is partially the art of avoiding potentially disruptive aspects of an issue.
5. Do you often feel harried or overwhelmed by a number of issues? If yes, you may need to devote more time to setting priorities—deciding which issues are relatively unimportant and perhaps delegating them to others.

ACCOMODATING

When is it useful:

- ✓ When you realize that you are wrong, thus allowing a better position to be heard, to learn from others, and to show that you are reasonable.
- ✓ When the issue is much more important to the other person than to yourself, thus satisfying the needs of others as a goodwill gesture to help maintain a cooperative relationship.
- ✓ To build up social credits for later issues which are important to you.
- ✓ When continued competition would only damage your cause, when you are clearly outmatched and losing.
- ✓ When preserving harmony and avoiding disruption are especially important.
- ✓ To aid in the managerial development of subordinates by allowing them to experiment and learn from their own mistakes.

Questions to ask yourself:

1. Do you feel that your own ideas and concerns are not getting the attention they deserve? Deferring too much to the concerns of others can deprive you of influence, respect, and recognition. It also deprives the organization of your potential contributions.
2. Is discipline lax? Although discipline for its own sake may be of little value, there are often rules, procedures, and assignments whose implementation is critical for you or the organization.
3. Do you have trouble building goodwill with others? Accommodations on minor issues that are important to others are gestures of goodwill.
4. Do others often seem to regard you as unreasonable?
5. Do you have trouble admitting it when you are wrong?
6. Do you recognize legitimate exceptions to rules?
7. Do you know when to give up?

COLLABORATING

When is it useful:

- ✓ To find an integrative solution when both sets of concerns are too important to be compromised.
- ✓ When you sense that a win-win solution exists but is elusive, one that satisfies the interests of both parties but is not immediately evident on the surface.
- ✓ When your objective is to learn, thus testing your own assumptions, understanding the views of others.
- ✓ To merge insights from people with different perspectives on a problem.
- ✓ To gain commitment by incorporating other's concerns into a consensual decision.
- ✓ To work through hard feelings which have been interfering with an interpersonal relationship.

Questions to ask yourself:

1. Do you spend time discussing issues in depth that do not seem to deserve it? Collaboration takes time and energy—perhaps the scarcest organizational resources. Trivial problems don't require optimal solutions, and not all personal differences need to be hashed out. The overuse of collaboration and consensual decision making sometimes represents a desire to minimize risk—by diffusing responsibility for a decision or by postponing action.
2. Does your collaborative behavior fail to elicit collaborative responses from others? The exploratory and tentative nature of some collaborative behavior may make it easy for others to disregard collaborative overtures; your trust and openness may be taken advantage of. You may be missing some cues that would indicate the presence of defensiveness, strong feelings, impatience, competitiveness, or conflicting interests.
3. Is it hard for you to see differences as opportunities for joint gain, as opportunities to learn or solve problems? Although there are often threatening or unproductive aspects of conflict, indiscriminate pessimism can prevent you from seeing collaborative
4. possibilities and thus deprive you of the mutual gains and satisfactions which accompany successful collaboration.
5. Are subordinates uncommitted to your decisions or policies? Perhaps their own concerns or ideas are not being incorporated into those decisions or policies.

COMPETING

When is it useful:

- ✓ When quick, decisive action is vital, e.g., in emergencies or where action must be taken immediately on account of a challenging circumstance.
- ✓ On important issues where unpopular courses of action need implementing, such as cost cutting, enforcing unpopular rules, discipline.
- ✓ To protect yourself against people who take advantage of noncompetitive behavior.

Questions to ask yourself:

1. Are you surrounded by people who live to answer "yes" to you? If so, perhaps it's because they have learned that it's unwise to disagree with you or have given up trying to influence you. This closes you off from important information.
2. Are subordinates afraid to admit ignorance and uncertainties to you? In competitive climates, one must fight for influence and respect, which means acting more certain and confident than one feels. The result is that people are much less able to ask for information and opinion and thus learn.
3. Do you often feel powerless in situations? Often it is because you are unaware of the power you do have, or perhaps unskilled in its use, or uncomfortable with the idea of using it. This may hinder your effectiveness by restricting your influence and "presence".
4. Do you have trouble taking a firm stand, even when you see the need? Sometimes concerns for other's feelings or anxieties about the use of power cause us to vacillate, which may mean postponing (avoiding) the decision and adding to the suffering, resentment and confusion of others.