

MANAGING CONFLICT

What's Your Conflict Resolution Style?

It is inevitable that you will be called upon to resolve interpersonal conflicts. Interpersonal conflict involves two or more individuals who perceive themselves in opposition to each other regarding preferred outcomes.

We respond to interpersonal conflict in at least five different ways: avoiding, accommodating, compromising, forcing and collaborating. What's your style?

Five Conflict Resolution Styles—Pros and Cons

1. *The avoidance style* involves behavior that is unassertive and uncooperative. We use this style to stay out of conflicts, ignore disagreements or remain neutral. This approach is a decision to let the conflict work itself out, by itself. It is a subconscious aversion to tension and frustration. This is a passive style that, if used excessively, results in unfavorable reactions from others. Nevertheless, it can be useful if a conscious decision is made to use it and it is appropriate for the situation. An example of an appropriate use of avoidance is: Two subordinates have to vent frustration and talk through a problem that does not concern you or the company. Don't get involved, just listen.

2. *The forcing style* is assertive but uncooperative. It reflects a "win-lose" approach in that only one person or group wins. We use this when we have no concern for others and our desire to achieve our own goals is our primary concern. This approach involves elements of abused power and dominance. Forcing is not useful in long-term relationships—others will have unfavorable evaluations of you.
3. *The accommodating style* represents behavior that is cooperative but not assertive. This approach may be useful in a long-term action plan to encourage cooperation. It is a passive act. Its negative consequence? Being perceived as weak. It's useful if the group or individual you work with has much power (i.e. boss) and abuses their power and you.
4. *The compromising style* represents behavior that is between cooperative and assertive. It's a give and take process, and can involve negotiation and a series of concessions. Those who use it tend to be evaluated favorably. This style is commonly accepted by many. However, when compared to the collaborative style, it does not maximize joint outcomes.
5. *The collaborative style* is behavior that is strongly cooperative and assertive. It reflects a "win-win" approach. Both parties win. This style represents a desire to maximize joint outcomes. People who use this style see conflict as a natural process that leads to helpful, creative solutions. They see that a conflict resolution that satisfies all leads to commitment to the solution. They see others as equals having legitimate opinions. Others evaluate this style and the user favorably. A team approach in your management style accommodates this conflict solution style most of the time.

Each of us tends to utilize a particular style more frequently than others. The choice usually reflects a personality characteristic. Of course there are other factors that influence the choice such as attitude and the power of others, and the demands of the present situation.

What is your attitude toward conflict? Is it a positive or negative force in your organization? If you've answered negatively then you need to re-examine the process, purpose and end results of conflict. It can be a powerful force that aids problem-solving and decision-making. Conflict occurs when two or more parties are in opposition over their preferred outcomes. This actually describes a problem situation, doesn't it? There are many problems in groups, between individuals and departments. The benefits of conflict are many.

Six Benefits of Conflict

1. Conflict is a signal that a problem exists.
2. Through the constructive process of resolving conflict, we see trouble situations we weren't aware of.
3. We search for the means to change a problem.
4. The process of searching for ways to resolve conflict may lead to innovation and change.
5. Conflict may make necessary change more acceptable as well as point out the need for change.
6. Better decision-making and problem-solving occurs under conflict. Historians point to the governmental policy group that made Kennedy's Bay of Pigs Cuban crisis decision a prime example of making a decision without conflict. The policy group was very cohesive and desired agreement on a decision. They did not consider enough alternative solutions the entire set of pros and cons before making their infamous decision. They didn't have conflict. No one wanted or could offer opposition to their decision because everyone agreed from the beginning. Decision-making is aided by conflict because more alternatives are generated and more complete evaluations are made of the problem situations.

However, conflict can also be a negative force if it's never resolved. A leader's attitude toward conflict determines whether it occurs openly and whether it's a positive force that invokes problem-solving behavior.

