

Conflict Styles: An Overview

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In the heat of a conflict when emotions are high, what do you do? Do you ignore the issues and bury them or do you let the other person have their way? Human beings are predisposed to respond to conflict in a certain manner. Conflict style is a general way of thinking about and responding to conflict. Roxanne Lulofs and Dudley Cahn, *Conflict: From Theory to Action*. Neadham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon, 2000. These choices or conflict styles have been studied by many scholars. Conflict styles are patterned responses or behaviors that have evolved over time. William Wilmot and Joyce Hocker, *Interpersonal Conflict*. New York, NY: McGraw Hill, 2011. The most popular classification scheme is that developed by Kenneth Thomas and Ralph Kilmann over 35 years ago. This essay will contain a review of each of these styles.

Interpersonal conflict and the response thereto resides in a two dimensional space which blends the needs of the self and the other. Assertiveness is the vertical axis measuring the concern for self and cooperativeness is the horizontal axis measuring the concern for the other party in conflict. Within this space reside the five different conflict styles: avoidance, accommodation, compromise, competition and collaboration. All of these styles have useful purposes in certain situations. The challenge is to know when to vary your style.

Avoidance

A person who avoids conflict has a low concern for herself and for others. In the two-dimensional space they are uncooperative and unassertive. Someone who uses avoidance has the ability to side step problems, leave issues unresolved, and allow others to take ownership. If an issue is unimportant avoidance may be the correct strategy. However, if you continually avoid conflicts it is like a simmering pot that will eventually boil over.

Accommodation

The skills of an accommodator are selflessness, obedience and an ability to yield. Accommodation is useful when you want to create goodwill or show reasonableness. If overused, it can result in restricted influence, loss of contribution, overlooked ideas and anarchy. If it is underused it can result in low morale and lack of rapport among colleagues.

Competition

The competitor is easy to recognize. Winning is the name of their game and they are only concerned about their own needs. They are at the top of the assertiveness scale and low on the cooperativeness scale. A competitive strategy is good in emergencies or other instances when quick decisions need to be made. Competitors use rank, position and influence and state their positions, opinions and feelings

clearly. When competition is overused the environment is characterized by a lack of feedback, low empowerment and reduced learning. If competition is underused, indecision or delayed action could have a crippling effect on an organization

Compromise

The compromiser is seeking ways to make a deal and meet halfway. In compromise each side's needs are only partially met. In the two dimensional space it lies in the middle. A compromiser demonstrates skills of moderation and negotiation. An overuse of compromise means a loss of the big picture perspective and lack of trust. If it is underused there may be frequent power struggles and unnecessary confrontations.

Collaboration

Sometimes referred to as the ideal alternative, collaboration is high on the assertiveness and cooperativeness axis. A collaborator demonstrates reasonableness and the ability to listen, to understand and to empathize. Lack of commitment, low empowerment and loss of innovation can take place when there is insufficient collaboration. On the other hand, when collaboration is overused there may be too much time spent on trivial matters and extra work created as a result. Collaboration takes time and energy to correctly execute.

Theory application tips

Knowledge of conflict strategies gives you power and control over your responses.

Give yourself time to think about your response to a conflict situation.

Assess the costs and benefits of using a given strategy.

Determine if you have the behavioral skills to employ a given strategy.

If using a given strategy in a particular situation is new for you, rehearse your response beforehand.

If the issues will impact many parts of the organization allow for enough time to develop a collaborative approach.