

Managing Conflict in the Workplace

OPTIMAL DYNAMIC SOLUTIONS

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Learning Objectives

At the end of this training class, participants should be able to:

- Gain a better understanding of conflict
- Understand how to break the Cycle of Conflict
- Develop greater awareness of how you approach and deal with conflict
- Understand the five modes of conflict management and when to use each
- Apply the steps to conflict resolution

What is Conflict?

When you think about conflict, what words first come to your mind? Write down as many words to describe conflict:

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

Conflict Defined

While there are many definitions of the word conflict, it is essentially defined in the same manner regardless the source. Merriam-Webster defines conflict as “a difference that prevents agreement”. American Heritage Dictionary defines conflict “to be in or come into opposition; differ” while BusinessDictionary defines it as “friction or opposition resulting from actual or perceived differences or incompatibilities”. Conflict is simply a difference or disagreement between two or more people.

It is important to note that disagreements often stem from inaccurate assumptions or interpretations. As the definition from BusinessDictionary points out, friction or opposition can still occur even if the assumptions or interpretations are faulty because they are based on an individual’s perceptions, not necessarily reality. Because conflict is often managed ineffectively, people commonly perceive it as negative. However, the outcome of conflict can be positive and beneficial when properly managed.

Unhealthy Conflict (Relationship Conflict)

Conflict can be counterproductive and even destructive if not managed effectively. For instance, some of the consequences of unhealthy conflict include:

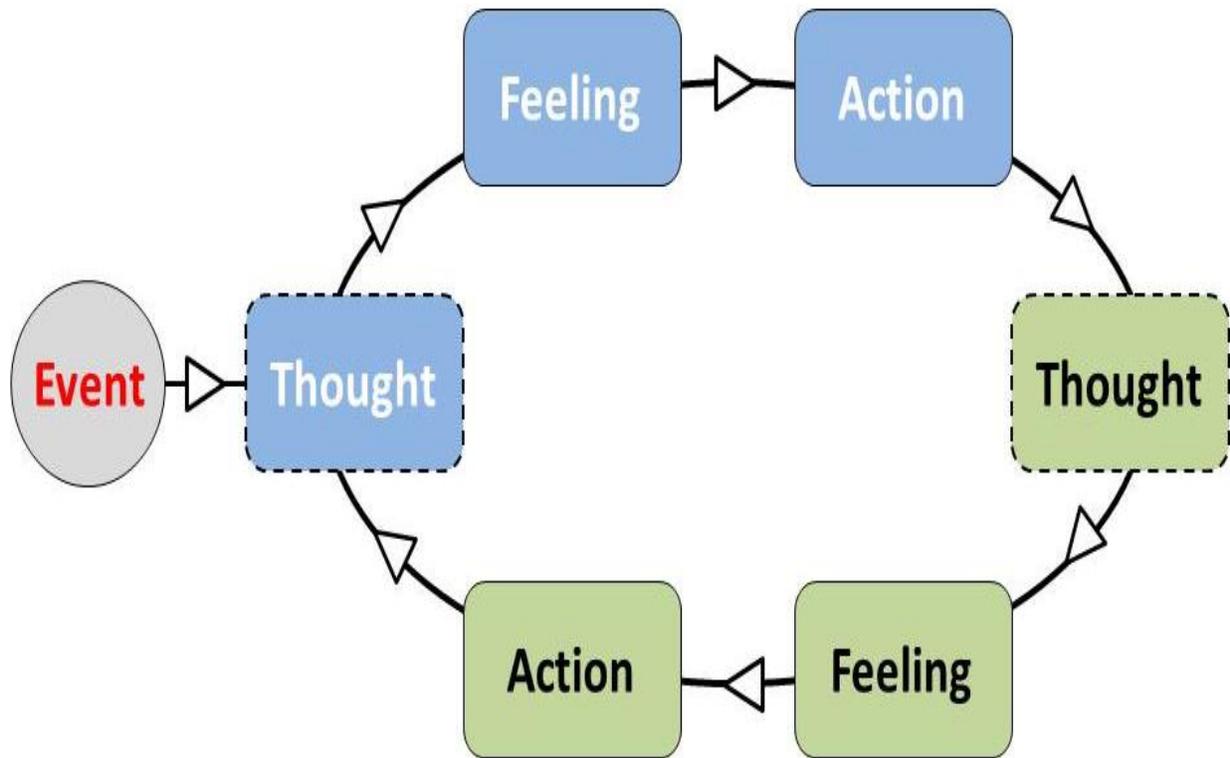
- Damaged relationships
- Poor decision-making
- Dissatisfaction and stress
- Wasted resources (time, energy, and money) dealing with the conflict
- Withdrawal and disengagement
- Lack of teamwork (decreased productivity)
- Harmful to the overall culture

Healthy Conflict (Task Conflict)

Conflict can be beneficial when managed effectively. Conflict management serves as a way to address the conflict in positive terms. It requires knowledge and use of specific skills to effectively deal with the conflict and it can be used in all aspects of life. For example, some of the benefits of healthy conflict include:

- Positive change
- Better decision making
- Stronger relationships
- Better problem solving
- Increased commitment
- Beneficial to the overall culture

Cycle of Conflict



The Cycle of Conflict illustrates how conflict typically begins and escalates. Something happens, an event, which an individual must process to make sense out of what occurred. These thoughts then impact the individual's feelings which ultimately direct what kind of action is taken. The other person who is involved in the scenario then must process and make sense of what the action, the other person took, means to them. These thoughts then impact this person's feelings which ultimately dictate what kind of action is taken. The loop continues until the cycle is broken. In order to break the cycle, one must change their thoughts so that their feelings and actions no longer encourage a negative reaction by the other person.

Conflict Resolution

Effective conflict resolution is the practice of identifying and dealing with conflict in a respectful, fair, and effective manner. It also requires knowledge and use of specific skills to effectively manage conflict. It is critical that the focus remains on the idea, issue, or how to resolve the problem (task conflict) rather than on personal differences, preferences or values (relationship conflict). Task conflict results in creativity and improved decision-making while relationship conflict tends to lower productivity and motivation in the workplace (Huan & Yzadanifard, 2012).

Steps to Conflict Resolution

- 1. Take Inventory**
- 2. Create an Effective Atmosphere**
- 3. Communicate for Success**
- 4. Generate Options**
- 5. Take Action**

1. Take Inventory

- **Emotions:** get your emotions in check before attempting to resolve the conflict. Make certain you are ready emotionally before rushing into the conflict resolution process. Rarely will good decisions be made when emotions are high.
- **Personal Responsibility:** take a step back and assess (honestly) how well you have handled the conflict so far. Reflect on what things you have said or done that have contributed to the conflict in a negative way. Also, consider how your thoughts, feelings and actions have contributed to the Cycle of Conflict. Taking personal responsibility is key to a successful conflict resolution.
- **Needs:** determine what you really need versus what you want. Be careful not to misinterpret a want for a need as it will only make a successful resolution to the conflict much more challenging.
- **Expectations:** set realistic expectations about what can be accomplished in the conflict. That is, expectations concerning the desired outcome of the conflict as well as what you expect from the other party.
- **Hot Buttons:** take the time to examine your hot buttons and determine whether you have allowed them to be pushed by others and if so, what impact that has made on the situation.
- **Conflict Mode:** determine what conflict mode would be most appropriate to use. Refer to the 10 Key Questions in Assessing which Conflict Mode to use depending on various factors (page 17).

Hot Buttons

Examine what your hot buttons are and how they impact your feelings and actions towards others.

In each box going across, write down the behaviors that sometimes push your buttons			
In each box going across, write down your feelings when faced with these behaviors			
In each box going across, write down the impact your feelings sometimes have when interacting with others (your behaviors)			



Conflict Mode Self-Assessment

The conflict mode self-assessment is used to determine an individual's preferred style of dealing with conflict (competing, accommodating, collaborating, avoiding or compromising). Once an individual understands their preferred approach in dealing with conflict, exploration of alternative ways to address situations more effectively can be accomplished through conflict management that is intentional and productive.

Consider work-related situations in which you find your wishes differing from those of another person. How do you usually respond to such work-related situations?

1 - **Never** 2 - **Rarely** 3 - **Sometimes** 4 - **Often** 5 - **Always**

MY ACTIONS	N	R	S	O	A
1. I persistently argue my position.	1	2	3	4	5
2. I try to put the needs of others above my own.	1	2	3	4	5
3. I try to arrive at a compromise both parties can accept.	1	2	3	4	5
4. I try not to get involved in conflicts.	1	2	3	4	5
5. I try to jointly & thoroughly investigate issues.	1	2	3	4	5
6. I try to find the flaw in the other person's position.	1	2	3	4	5
7. I strive to foster harmony.	1	2	3	4	5
8. I negotiate to get a portion of what I propose.	1	2	3	4	5
9. I avoid openly discussing controversial subjects.	1	2	3	4	5

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10. I openly share information with others when resolving disagreements.	1	2	3	4	5
11. I enjoy winning an argument.	1	2	3	4	5
12. I go along with other people's suggestions.	1	2	3	4	5
13. I look for a middle ground to resolve disagreements.	1	2	3	4	5
14. I keep my true feelings to myself to avoid hard feelings.	1	2	3	4	5
15. I encourage open sharing of concerns and issues.	1	2	3	4	5
16. I am reluctant to admit I'm wrong.	1	2	3	4	5
17. I try to help others avoid "losing face" in a disagreement.	1	2	3	4	5
18. I stress the advantages of "give & take."	1	2	3	4	5
19. I encourage others to take the lead in resolving controversy.	1	2	3	4	5
20. I state my position as being only one point of view.	1	2	3	4	5

Conflict Mode Self-Assessment

Scoring Sheet

COMPETING		ACCOMODATING		COMPROMISING	
ITEM	SCORE	ITEM	SCORE	ITEM	SCORE
1		2		3	
6		7		8	
11		12		13	
16		17		18	
TOTAL		TOTAL		TOTAL	

AVOIDING		COLLABORATING	
ITEM	SCORE	ITEM	SCORE
4		5	
9		10	
14		15	
19		20	
TOTAL		TOTAL	

My Highest Score is _____

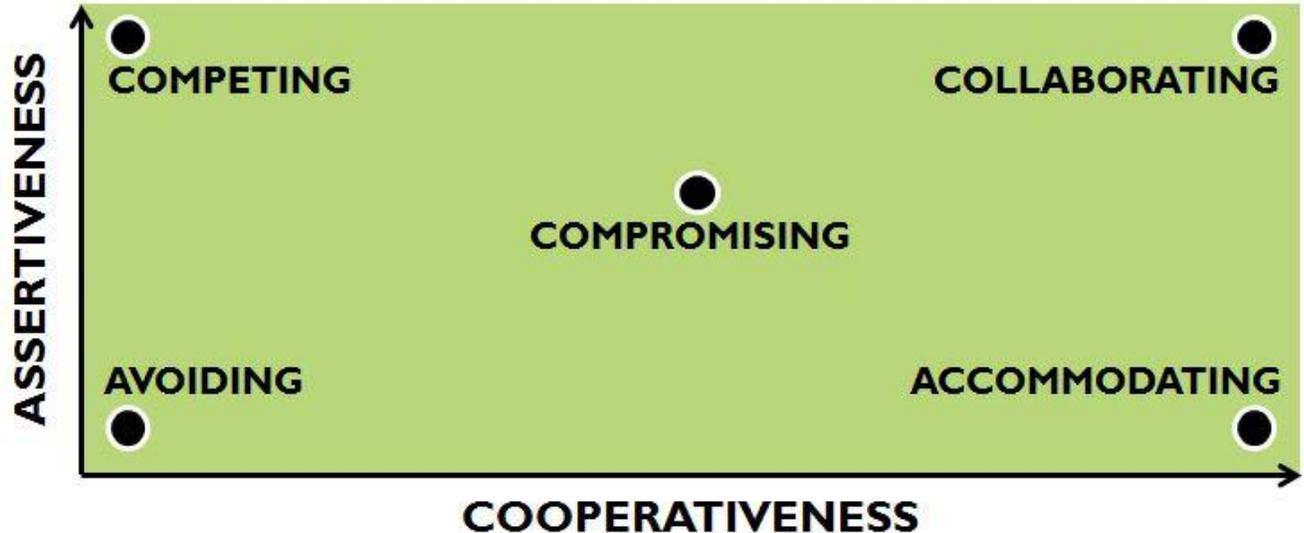
My Most Often Used Conflict Management Mode is _____

My Lowest Score is _____

My Least Often Used Conflict Management Mode is _____

Adapted from Managing Conflict, David A. Whetten and Kim S. Cameron, Harper Collin (1993)

Characteristics of the Conflict Modes



Assertiveness refers to the extent to which you try to get your own needs met when your wishes differ from others. **Cooperativeness** refers to the extent to which you try to get other people's needs met. For example, the competing conflict mode is high on assertiveness and low on cooperativeness which means that it is solely interested in winning the conflict or getting their way (sometimes at the expense of others). The accommodating conflict mode is just the opposite. It is high on cooperativeness and low on assertiveness. Therefore, an individual utilizing this conflict mode yields to others in an effort to have their needs met (often at the expense of one's own needs).

Competing

Characteristics:

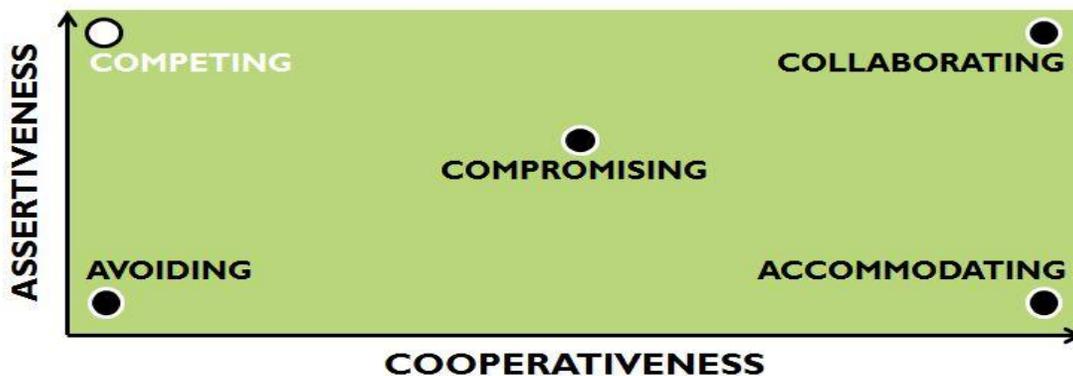
- Assertive
- Uncooperative
- Pursues own concerns and needs sometimes at the expense of others
- It's all about defending your position; standing your ground
- Able to effectively communicate views and persuade others
- Opposite of Accommodating

When it may be appropriate to use:

- Issue is very important to you (there is a need to protect your or own self-interests)
- Little time for discussion and quick action needs to be taken (i.e. crisis)
- Problem is simple (does not require input from others)
- Culture and reward system support a win/lose environment

When it may be inappropriate to use:

- Cooperation from others is important
- Complex problems
- Issue is important to others
- Maintaining good relationships with others is essential



Accommodating

Characteristics:

- Unassertive
- Cooperative
- Neglects one's own concerns to satisfy the concerns of others
- Yields to another's point of view
- Selfless
- The opposite of competing

When it may be appropriate to use:

- Issue is more important to others than to you
- Little time for discussion
- Preserving the relationship
- Continued competing would likely damage your cause (i.e. when you are losing)
- Issue is simple (does not require input from others)
- Fostering development of subordinates (i.e. allowing them to experiment)
- Culture and reward system encourage compliance

When it may be inappropriate to use:

- Complex problems
- Issue is important to you
- You have unique insight regarding the issue



Compromising

Characteristics:

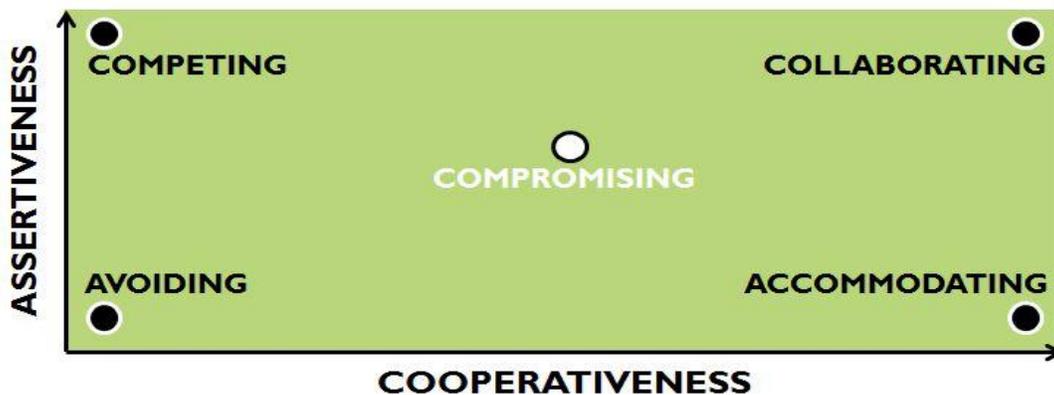
- Moderately assertive
- Moderately cooperative
- Goal is to satisfy both parties
- Finding the middle ground (splitting the difference)
- Negotiating
- Between competing and accommodating

When it may be appropriate to use:

- Issue is moderately important to everyone
- Little time for discussion
- Back-up to collaborating or when competing fails to be successful
- The value of maintaining the relationship is more important than the outcome
- Culture and reward system encourage quick fixes and immediate results

When it may be inappropriate to use:

- Complex issues
- Issue is very important to both parties
- One or both parties are unwilling to give up something to reach middle ground



Avoiding

Characteristics:

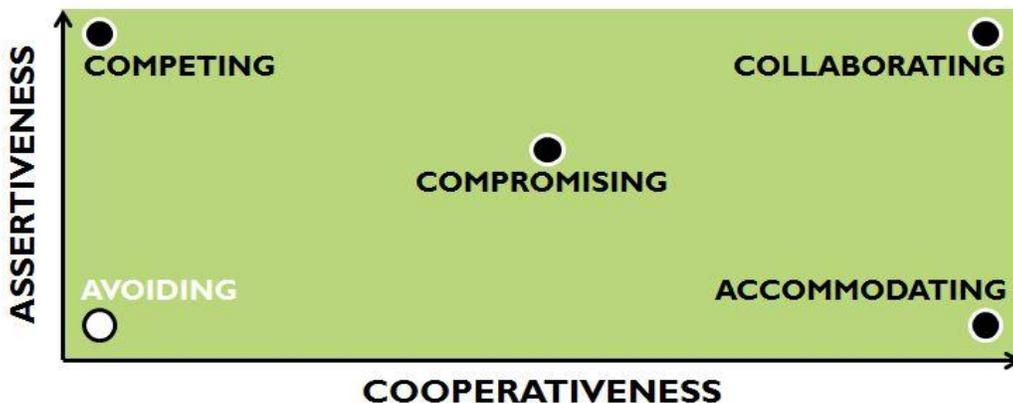
- Unassertive
- Uncooperative
- Does not pursue concerns of other party
- Withdrawals
- Does not deal with the situation
- Opposite of Collaborating

When it may be appropriate to use:

- Stress is overwhelming or to reduce tensions and regain perspective
- Low levels of trust
- Issue is not important or other issues are more pressing
- Need for more information before making a decision
- Culture and reward system does not encourage cooperation and teamwork

When it may be inappropriate to use:

- Issue is important to you
- Issue needs to be resolved
- Maintaining good relationships with others is essential



Collaborating

Characteristics:

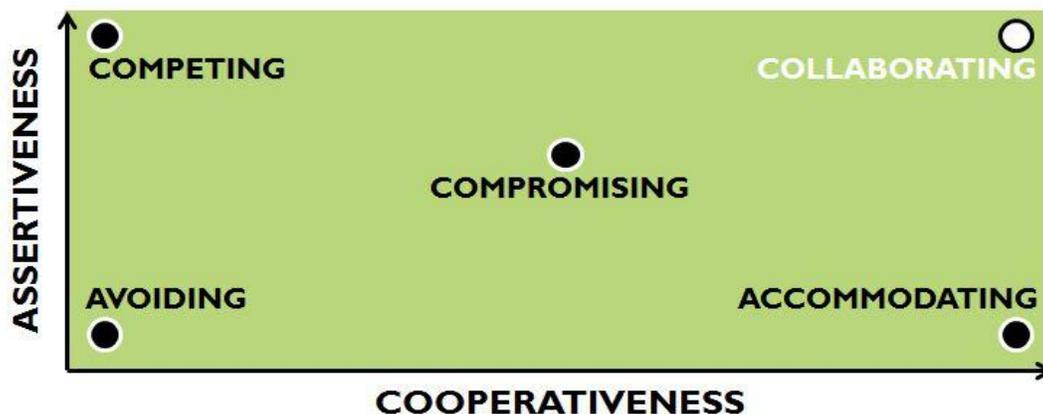
- Assertive
- Cooperative
- Works with others to find creative solutions
- Attempts to find a solution that benefits everyone
- Opposite of Avoiding

When it may be appropriate to use:

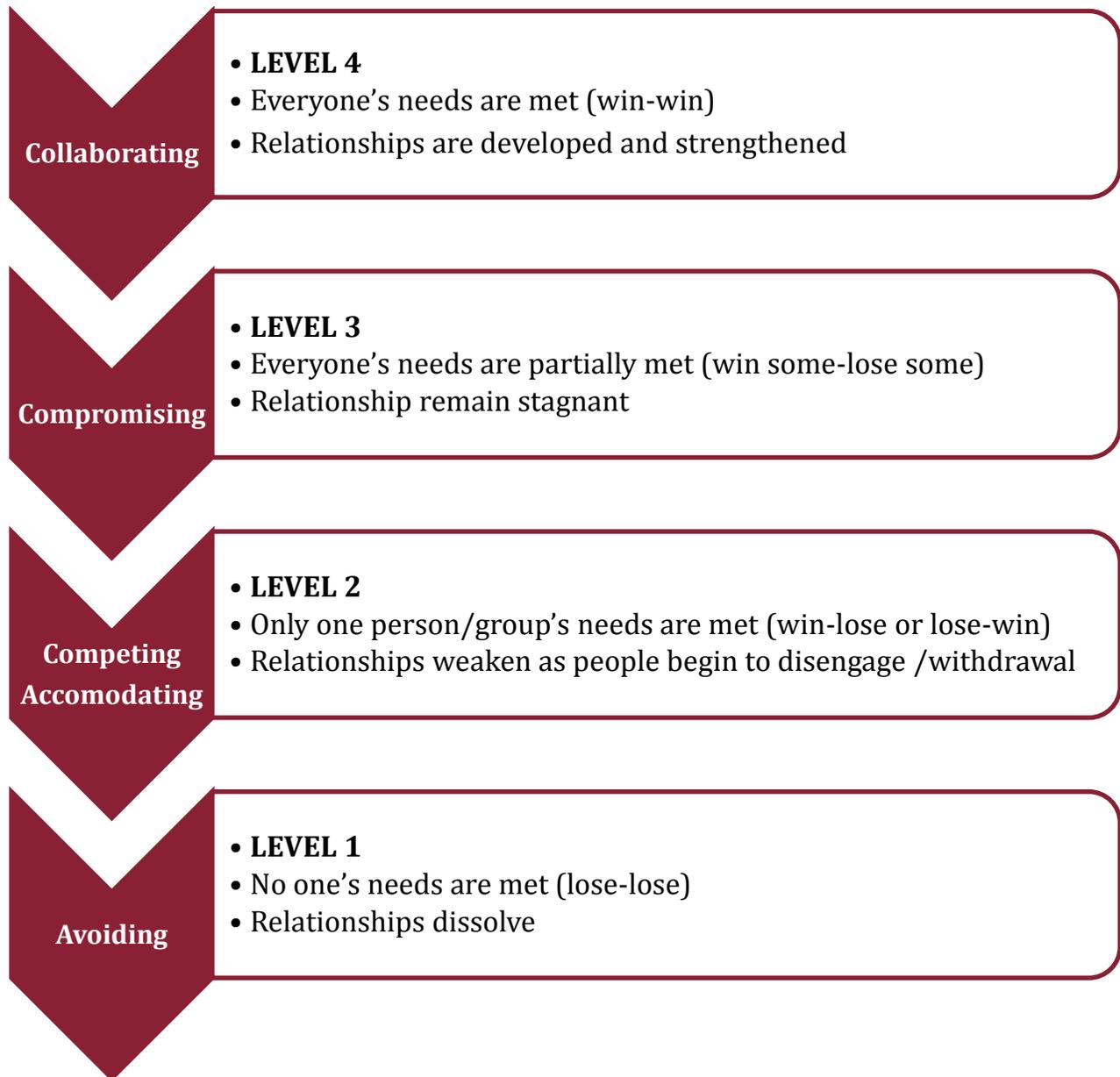
- Issue is very important to everyone
- When both sets of concerns are too important to be compromised
- High levels of trust / positive culture
- Complex issue (multiple people are needed to solve the issue)
- Ample time available
- Culture and reward system encourages cooperation and teamwork

When it may be inappropriate to use:

- Overwhelming stress
- Low levels of trust / negative culture
- Issue is not very important or critical
- Limited time



Conflict Management and its Impact on Relationships



When dealing with conflict, it is very important to pay special attention to how your chosen conflict mode will likely impact the relationship over time. For instance, when people's needs are met, relationships tend to develop and strengthen as a result. However, when a person's needs are continuously unmet, over time they usually become disengaged. This in turn is a reason why many relationships weaken and ultimately dissolve.

Which Conflict Mode Should I Use?

All five conflict modes have tremendous value and can be very effective in the appropriate situation. Therefore, it is important to develop your skill and knowledge in being able to use all five conflict modes in order to effectively manage conflict. Regardless of which conflict mode is chosen, it should be done with sensitivity, respect, and care.

10 Key Questions in Assessing Which Conflict Mode to Use

1. Is there overwhelming Stress?

If there is a lot of stress, tension, or distrust, a conflict mode such as collaboration will not work effectively. One of the main priorities should be to address the culture if there is overwhelming stress.

2. Is the conflict simple or complex?

A simple problem is one that can be solved by one person while a complex problem is one that needs multiple people involved. When dealing with a complex problem, collaboration is often the most effective conflict mode to use provided that there is ample time to discuss the issue and trust among both parties.

3. How important is the topic?

The importance of the topic may determine which conflict mode to use in some situations. For example, if the issue is only important to one person (or group), then accommodating may be the most appropriate choice.

4. Is there sufficient time?

How much time is available is critical in determining which conflict mode to use. In situations where you have little time, compromising might be the most effective choice to use.

5. Is there sufficient trust?

Assessing the level of trust is very important in a conflict situation. Without trust, a conflict mode such as collaboration will not be very effective.

6. Do people have good listening and communication skills?

Conflict modes such as collaboration and compromising rely on good communication skills.

7. Do cultural norms and the reward system encourage sharing of needs and concerns?

Cultural norms and the reward system need to be explored and assessed to determine which conflict mode to use. If they do not encourage sharing of needs and concerns, conflict modes such as compromising or accommodating might be most effective.

8. How important is the relationship?

If people continuously do not get their needs met, eventually they will disengage and withdrawal from the relationship.

9. What are the potential consequences if you engage in the conflict?

Are you ready? Is the other party ready? How may the relationship be impacted by addressing the conflict now?

10. What are the potential consequences if you do not engage in the conflict?

What may result if you put off or delay addressing the conflict? How may the relationship be impacted by not engaging in the conflict now?

Effective use of Conflict Modes

Identify which conflict mode would likely be most effective to use for each scenario and explain why.

Competing - Accommodating - Compromising - Avoiding - Collaborating

1. You are part of a 10 member team that is involved in a meeting to discuss an issue that is critical to all parties involved. Your group has two weeks to reach resolution to the matter. During the meeting, the environment has become very stressful and communication among staff is not appearing to be very effective.

2. You have been assigned the responsibility of working with another co-worker to research and eventually make recommendations for a new system that will be implemented later in the year. You have made good progress working together but are now very close to the deadline. You and your co-worker do not agree on the final recommendation that will need to be made. Since it is not critical to the overall implementation of the system, the final recommendation is only of moderate importance to you and your co-worker.

3. You are in disagreement with another manager about an organizational issue. During the conflict, you can tell that the issue is of great importance to the other manager. As you learn more and give the issue additional consideration, you realize that the issue is far less important to you and will have little impact on your department.

4. You are part of a selection committee that has been charged with the responsibility of recruiting and hiring a key member to your department. During the process, the committee has been working very well together and has made excellent progress. However, when the final decision comes down to two remaining candidates for the position, there is some disagreement as far as who should be selected. This decision is not only very important to the organization but to all committee members involved. The committee has just two days remaining to make a decision.

5. You are a county building codes inspector. During your inspection of two homes in a new neighborhood, the building supervisor asks you to “overlook” two violations you noted on your inspections report.

2. Create an Effective Atmosphere

- Timing: in most cases we have the opportunity to decide when to approach the other party in an effort to resolve the conflict. When deciding on the timing, make certain there is plenty of it to appropriately discuss the conflict, chosen at a time when both parties are ready, and at a time that maximizes concentration and good communication.
- Location: choose a place that is free from distractions, neutral to both people or groups, and in a location that is conducive to positive interactions.



3. Communicate for Success

- Set the conflict up for Success: set the conflict up for success by what you say in your initial comments. It is important that you convey the willingness to listen, work together with the other party, and that you have confidence that a positive outcome will be reached.
- Clarify Perceptions and Understand Needs: seek to understand in an effort to get on the same page with the other person or group. Share your perceptions of the conflict in order to clear up inaccurate assumptions and be certain to invite the other person or group to do the same.
- Active Listening: use skills such as paraphrasing, summarizing, clarifying, and positive body language to encourage effective communication.
- Focus on the ideas, issues or problems to be resolved: keep the focus of your communication on the main ideas and issues of the conflict (task conflict) rather than getting sidetracked on personal differences, preferences or values (relationship conflict). It is highly unlikely that a successful resolution to the conflict will occur if the conflict becomes personal.
- Non-Defensive Language: communicate in a manner which allows people to come together to solve conflict rather than becoming defensive.
 - Use “I” statements
 - Make observations rather than interpretations
 - Avoid making absolutes such as always or never
 - Stay in the present rather than delving into the past
 - Keep perspective
- Faces of Conflict: meet the other person where they are. Some of the “faces” that you will typically see:
 - Denial: “what conflict? I don’t have any conflict with you”
 - Avoidance: “I don’t want to deal with this right now”
 - Disillusioned: “It’s hopeless. He will NEVER change!”
 - Unaccountable: “I’ve done absolutely nothing wrong; it’s all their fault!”
 - Readiness: “Okay, I’m now ready to deal with the conflict productively”

In order for someone to be ready for a productive conflict, they must be willing and able to move through the various faces that they choose to experience. For example, if they are wearing the face of denial, it will be important to communicate with them in a manner in which you can show them convincing evidence that a conflict does in fact exist. Until you are successful in doing this, they will not be ready to deal with the conflict productively.

Use of Non-Defensive Language

Re-write the following sentences using non-defensive language.

Working with you is exhausting. You always want your way and you never listen to my point of view.

There is no way to talk to them. _____

If things don't get better fast, we are going to be the cause of the organization's failure.

Conflict Scenario 1

Susan and Monica have had a very good working relationship for approximately three years. They enjoy going out to lunch and usually work well together on projects. However, last week they got into a very intense argument about an issue relating to a project that they have been working on for over a year which they just completed.

About a month later, Susan and Monica were assigned to work together on another project. They were still clearly upset regarding their last argument and as a result, communication was minimal. When it came time to make the decision on which vendor to use for a particular event that they were planning, they got into another argument. Emotions got the best of both and in disgust, Monica left the conference room.

Later that day, while still angry about Monica's behavior, Susan decided that enough was enough. She walked down the hall straight into Monica's office and told her that they needed to talk. She went on to explain that due to all of the tension between the two of them, she no longer likes coming to work. Additionally, she told Monica that they need to get their acts together or they will likely get fired. Monica fired back and told Susan that now wasn't the time for this discussion. She explained that she was right in the middle of a contract that a customer needs before the close of business. Monica then escorted Susan out of her office and closed her door in frustration.

What conflict modes are being used and what impact do they have in the scenario?

What did Susan fail to do before approaching Monica in her office? *Refer to Take Inventory - Step 1.*

How could Susan have created a more effective atmosphere? *Refer to Create an Effective Atmosphere - Step 2.*

What could Susan have done differently to encourage a more productive exchange with Monica? *Refer to Communicate for Success - Step 3.*

4. Generate Options

- Develop Stepping Stones: there are times in which you have a better opportunity for success by starting with issues that stand a good chance of being resolved rather than immediately addressing the central issues of the conflict.
- Brainstorm Options: set aside options where you disagree as you can always come back to those issues later. Instead, look for commonalities that you have and identify any needs that you both share. At this point, it is important to focus on a free flow of ideas without evaluation or judgment.
- Invite the Other Person to Share First: invite and encourage the other person to share first in order to set the tone that you value their ideas and want to work together towards a win-win resolution.

5. Take Action

- Identify Key Options: work together to identify options that will meet individual needs, shared needs, and one's that will improve the overall relationship.
- Clarify Expectations: work together to ensure that there is agreement on exactly what outcomes you are seeking as well as what each person or group is responsible for doing.



Conflict Scenario 2

Judy and William have worked together for two years and have roughly the same amount of responsibilities in the office. Since working more closely on projects over the past six months, the two have not been getting along very well. Judy gets very frustrated with William because he seems to take too long to get things done. She often complains that he spends too much time on his work and is incredibly slow. She believes this why they are always rushed at the end of every project which creates a lot of unnecessary stress.

William, on the other hand, complains that Judy just wants to get things done quickly and does so carelessly. This in turn, according to William, is why they sometimes have to redo parts of projects which results in them being rushed to meet deadlines. William doesn't mind the rush since he believes that he is at his best when under pressure. However, what he does mind is completing projects that are not done at a very high level of quality. Judy and William both realize that they are not working very well as a team. They also realize that this is impacting the quality of their work which is very important to both of them. However, neither person feels comfortable addressing the conflict directly. Instead, they choose to vent their frustration to their co-workers.

What conflict modes are being used and what impact do they have in the scenario?

What appears to be their shared need(s)?

How could clarifying perceptions help to resolve the conflict? *Refer to Communicate for Success - Step 3.*

Suggested Reading

- *Building Conflict Competent Teams*, Craig Runde, & Tim Flanagan (2008).
- *Conflict Management in the Workplace*, Shay & Margaret McConnon (2008)
- *Fierce Conversations: Achieving Success at Work and in Life One Conversation at a Time*, Susan Scott (2004)
- *The Eight Essential Steps to Conflict Resolution*, Dudley Weeks (1992)
- *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, Patrick Lencioni (2002)