

- Topics:**
- Identify your conflict reaction profile
 - Gain an understanding of 5 conflict management styles
 - Consider the conflict resolution process and the tips for managing conflict, tension and anger

Conflict

Have you ever had a conflict and wished you could have handled it better?

Conflict comes about from differences – in needs, values, interests, goals. Sometimes, through these differences we may complement each other, but sometimes we will conflict with others. Conflict is not a problem in itself – it’s what we do with it that matters. It is important that we do something because whether we like it or not, conflicts



demand our energy. In fact, an unresolved conflict can call on tremendous amounts of our attention. We all know how exhausting an unresolved conflict can be. It is not always easy to fix the problem, but a great energy boost can come when we do.

“Don't be afraid of opposition. Remember, a kite rises against, not with, the wind.” Hamilton Wright Mabie

Conflict 101

- **A conflict is more than just a disagreement.** It is a situation in which one or both parties perceive a threat (whether or not the threat is real).
- **Conflicts continue to fester when ignored.** Because conflicts involve perceived threats to our well-being, they stay with us until we face and resolve them.
- **We respond to conflicts based on our perceptions** of the situation, not necessarily to an objective review of the facts. Our perceptions are influenced by our life experiences, culture, values, and beliefs.
- **Conflicts trigger strong emotions.** If you aren't comfortable with your emotions or able to manage them in times of stress, you won't be able to resolve conflict successfully.
- **Conflicts are an opportunity for growth.** When you're able to resolve conflict in a relationship, it builds trust. You can feel secure knowing your relationship can survive challenges and disagreements.

Inside this Issue	
Conflict Reaction Profile Quiz	2
Ways of Managing & Resolving Conflict	3
Tips for Managing Conflict, Tension and Anger	3
Conflict Management Styles	4
Conflict Resolution Process	7
Resources for Managing Conflict	7

Conflict Reaction Profile

Record your reaction to the following statements. Read each item carefully and place a number from the answer scale next to each statement.

Numbering Scale: 1 – Seldom 2 – Sometimes 3 – Most of the time

1. ____ I can be swayed to someone else's point of view.
2. ____ I shut down people with whom I disagree.
3. ____ I address the issue at hand diplomatically and do not attack the individual.
4. ____ I think that others try to "bully" their way with me.
5. ____ I express my thoughts and beliefs tactfully when they differ from others.
6. ____ Rather than offer my opinion when I disagree with someone, I keep it to myself.
7. ____ I listen to other people's points of view with an open mind.
8. ____ I let my emotions get the best of me.
9. ____ I raise my voice to make my point.
10. ____ I tend to belittle other people when making my point.
11. ____ I look for ways to negotiate and compromise with others.
12. ____ I have been told I am too pushy.
13. ____ I make sure my opinion is heard in any controversy.
14. ____ I think conflict in meetings is necessary.
15. ____ I am the most vocal in meetings when trying to get my point across.

Scoring: A Add the total score from statements 1, 2, 4, 6, 8, 9, 10, 12, 13, 14, 15 together. ____

B Add the total score from statements 3, 5, 7, 11 together ____

A Score _____ **minus B Score** _____ = **Your Score** _____

Conflict comes about from differences - in needs, values and motivations. Sometimes through these differences we complement each other, but sometimes we conflict. Conflict is not a problem in itself - it is what we do with it that counts.

What does your score mean?

1 - 4	"Passive"	You may be such a pushover that you allow difficult people to walk all over you. You will benefit from learning to stand up for your ideas and opinions in a diplomatic and tactful way.
5 - 10	"Assertive"	You are professionally assertive when dealing with people, particularly difficult people. Continue to be open to listening to different points of view, and express your ideas and opinions appropriately.
11 +	"Aggressive"	You may be so combative that people might avoid interacting with you. You will benefit from learning to listen and express your opinions more effectively.

Do You...

- Avoid conflict at all costs?
- Feel that any criticism or disagreement is an attack on you?
- Hit “below the belt” and regret it later?
- Feel out of control when conflict arises?
- Withdraw and become silent when you are angry?
- Store up complaints from the distant past?

At one time or another, most of us have done one or more of these things. That’s because in most relationships conflict inevitably arises, and for many of us, it creates significant discomfort. But conflict, if handled appropriately, can actually strengthen relationships and improve our understanding of each other. When handled badly, conflict can result in broken friendships, ended relationships, and long-simmering feuds.

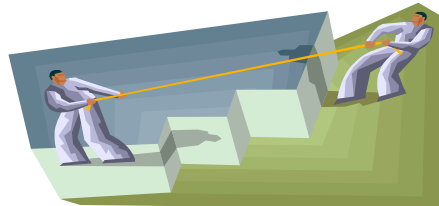
Ways of Managing and Resolving Conflict

Unhealthy Responses to Conflict	Healthy Responses to Conflict
An inability to recognize and respond to the things that matter to the other person.	The capacity to recognize and respond to the things that matter to the other person.
Explosive, angry, hurtful, and resentful reactions.	Calm, non-defensive, and respectful reactions.
The inability to compromise or see the other person’s side.	The ability to seek compromise and avoid punishing.
The fear and avoidance of conflict; the expectation of bad outcomes.	A belief that facing conflict head on is the best thing for both sides.
Holding on to resentments and anger.	A readiness to forgive and forget, and to move past the conflict without holding resentments or anger.

Tips for Managing Conflict, Tension, and Anger

Accept conflict. Remember that conflict is natural and happens in every on-going relationship. Conflict is a sign of a need for change and an opportunity for growth, new understanding, and improved communication. Approach conflict situations as opportunities to strengthen interpersonal relationships.

Be a calming agent. Your response to a conflict can escalate or decrease the intensity of the situation. To be calming, frame the issues from an objective or neutral point of view. Plan ahead how you will work with the other person to achieve resolution.



Analyze the conflict. To help clarify the specific problem, consider the following questions:

What triggered the conflict?

Who are you angry with?

What are you not getting that you want?

What are you afraid of losing?

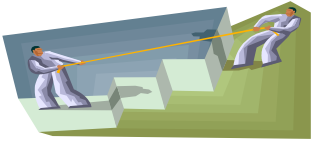
Is your conflict/anger accurate or over exaggerated?

How can your conflict be resolved?

Listen actively. Put yourself in the other person’s situation and imagine how you would feel and react. Look at the other side before defending your own. Restate the positions held by both sides of a conflict to ensure that the conflict is not just a misunderstanding and to show you understand the other’s perspective.

Model neutral language. When people are in conflict they use inflammatory language such as profanity, name calling, and

Tips for Managing Conflict, Tension, and Anger, continued



conflict. Restate inflammatory language in a more objective way to help make the information less emotionally

charged and more useful for productive conversations. Use the “I message” technique to help do this: *I feel* (identify feeling)

When you (objective description of the behavior)

Because (specific impact or consequences)

I would like (what you want the person to do in the future to prevent the problem)

Separate the person from the problem. View the conflict or problem as a specific behavior or set of circumstances rather than attributing negative feelings to the whole person. This approach makes the problem more manageable and hopeful than deciding you “can’t stand” this person any longer.

Focus on the future. In conflict we tend to remember every single thing that ever bothered us about that person. People in conflict need to vent about the past but they often end up dwelling on the past. The best way to take ownership of the problem is to recognize that regardless of the past, you need to create a plan to address the present conflict and those that may arise in the future.

Agree to disagree. Each person has a unique point of view and rarely agrees on every detail. For example, consider the differing testimony of witnesses that all see the same car accident. Being right is not what is important. Clarifying and understanding perceptions is more productive.

Pick your battles. Conflicts can be draining, so it is important to consider whether the issue is really worthy of your time and energy.

Conflict Management Styles

You have choices as to how to manage a conflict. The Competing, Collaborating, Compromising, Avoiding, and Accommodating are the styles discussed in the next several pages.

Competing

Also known as *forcing*. You firmly pursue your own concerns despite the resistance of the other person. This may involve pushing one viewpoint at the expense of another or maintaining firm resistance to another person’s actions.

Examples of when *competing* may be appropriate:

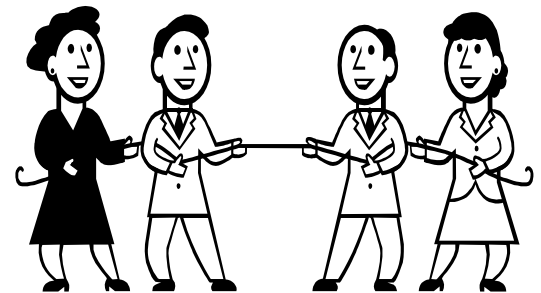
- In certain situations when all other less forceful methods don’t work or are ineffective.
- When you need to stand up for your own rights, resist aggression and pressure.
- When a quick resolution is required and using force is justified (e.g. in a life-threatening situation; to stop an aggression).
- As a last resort to resolve a long-lasting conflict.

Possible advantages of *competing*:

- May provide a quick resolution to a conflict.
- Increases self-esteem and draws respect when former resistance or actions were a response to an aggression or hostility.

Some caveats of *competing*:

- May negatively affect your relationship with the other party in the long run.
- May cause the other person to react in the same way, even if they did not intend to be forceful originally.
- Cannot take advantage of the strong points of the other person’s position.
- Taking this approach may require a lot of energy and be exhausting to some individuals.



Collaborating

Also known as *problem solving*. You attempt to work with the other person to find a win-win solution to the problem at hand – the one that most satisfies the concerns of both parties. The win-win approach sees conflict resolution as an opportunity to come to a mutually beneficial result. It includes identifying the underlying concerns of the other person and finding an alternative which meets each person's concerns.

Examples of when collaborating may be appropriate:

- When consensus and commitment of other parties is important.
- In a collaborative environment.
- When it is required to address the interests of multiple parties.
- When a high level of trust is present.
- When a long-term relationship is important.
- When you need to work through hard feelings, animosity, etc.
- When you don't want to have full responsibility.

Possible advantages of *collaborating*:

- Leads to solving the actual problem.
- Leads to a win-win outcome.
- Reinforces mutual trust and respect.
- Builds a foundation for effective collaboration in the future.
- Shared responsibility for the outcome.
- You earn the reputation of a good negotiator.

For those involved, the outcome of the conflict resolut-



tion is less stressful (however, the process of finding and establishing a win-win solution may be very involved – see the caveats).

Some caveats of *collaborating*:

- Requires a commitment from all parties to look for a mutually acceptable solution.
- May require more effort and more time than some other methods. A win-win solution may not be evident.
- For the same reason, collaborating may not be practical when timing is crucial and a quick solution or fast response is required.
- Once one party loses their trust in the other, the relationship falls back to other methods of conflict resolution. Therefore, all involved parties must continue collaborative efforts to maintain a collaborative relationship.

Compromising

You look for an expedient and mutually acceptable solution which partially satisfies both parties.

Examples of when *compromise* may be appropriate:

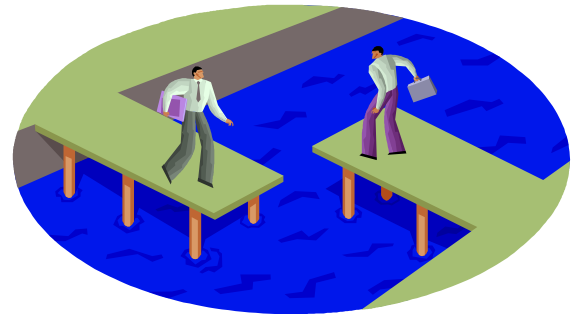
- When the goals are moderately important and are not worth the use of more assertive or more involving approaches, such as competing or collaborating.
- To reach temporary settlement on complex issues.
- To reach expedient solutions on important issues.
- As a first step when the involved parties do not know each other well or haven't yet developed a high level of mutual trust.
- When collaboration or competing do not work.

Possible advantages of *compromising*:

- Faster resolution of issues. Compromising may be more practical when time is a factor.
- Can provide a temporary solution while still looking for a win-win solution.
- Lowers the levels of tension and stress resulting from the conflict.

Some caveats of using *compromise*:

- May result in a situation where both parties are not fully satisfied with the outcome.
- Does not contribute to building trust in the long run.
- May require close monitoring and control to ensure the agreements are met.



Avoiding

Also known as *withdrawing*. This is when you do not pursue your own concerns or those of the other party. The conflict is not addressed – you either sidestep, postpone, or simply withdraw from the conflict.

Examples of when *avoiding* may be appropriate:

- When the issue is trivial and not worth the effort.
- When more important issues are pressing, and you don't have time to deal with it.
- In situations where postponing a response is beneficial to you (e.g. when it is not the right time or place to confront the issue; when you need time to think and collect information before you act if you are unprepared or taken by surprise).
- When you see no chance of getting your concerns met or you would have to put forth unreasonable efforts.
- When you would have to deal with hostility.
- When you are unable to handle the conflict (e.g. if you are too emotionally involved or others can handle it better).

Possible advantages of *avoiding*:

- When the other person is forcing/attempts aggression, you may choose to withdraw and postpone your response until you are in a more favorable circumstance to confront.
- Avoiding is a low stress approach when the conflict is short.
- Gives you the ability and time to focus on more important or more urgent issues instead.
- Gives you time to better prepare and collect information before you act.

Accommodating

Also known as *smoothing*. You accommodate the concerns of the other person first of all, rather than your own concerns.

Examples of when *accommodating* may be appropriate:

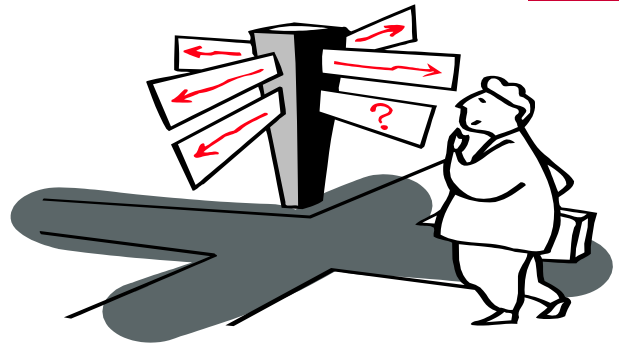
- When it is important to provide a temporary relief from the conflict or buy time until you are in a better position to respond.
- When the issue is not as important to you as it is to the other person.
- When you accept that you were wrong.
- When you have no choice or when continued competition would be detrimental.

Possible advantages of *accommodating*:

- In some cases, accommodating will help to protect more important interests while giving up on some less important ones.
- Gives an opportunity to reassess the situation from a different angle.

Some caveats of *accommodating*:

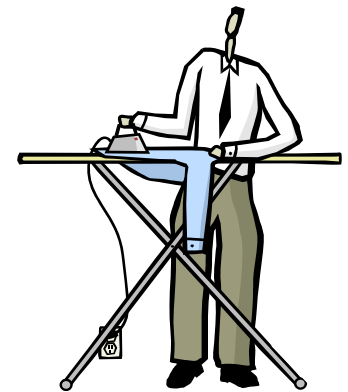
- There is a risk of being taken advantage of, therefore it is important to keep the right balance and this requires some skill.
- May negatively affect your confidence in your ability to respond to an aggressive person.
- It makes it more difficult to transition to a win-win solution in the future.
- Some of your supporters may not like your accommodating response and be turned off.



Some caveats of *avoiding*:

- May lead to weakening or losing your position; not acting may be interpreted as an agreement.
- Using avoiding strategies without negatively affecting your own position requires certain skill and experience.
- When multiple parties are involved, avoiding may negatively affect your relationship with a party that expects your action.

Pick your battles. Conflicts can be draining, so it is important to consider whether the issue is really worthy of your time and energy.



A Conflict Resolution Process

- Step One:** State the problem clearly. At first, try to stick to the facts; then, once you've stated the facts, state your feelings. Use "I" messages to describe feelings of anger, hurt, or disappointment. Avoid "you" messages such as "you make me angry..."
- Step Two:** Invite your partner-in-conflict to share his or her point of view, and use active listening skills. Be careful not to interrupt, and genuinely try to hear his or her concerns and feelings. If it seems helpful, try to restate what you have heard in a way that lets your partner know you have fully understood, and ask them to do the same for you.
- Step Three:** Try to take the other's perspective – that is, try to see the problem through his or her eyes. The "opposing" viewpoint can make sense even if you don't agree.
- Step Four:** Propose specific solutions and invite the other person to propose solutions, too.
- Step Five:** Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of each proposal.
- Step Six:** Be ready for some compromise. Allowing the other person only one course of action will likely hinder resolution. When there is agreement on a proposal to change, celebrate! Set a trial period for the new behavior. At the end of the trial period, you can discuss the possibility of modifying or continuing the change. If no solution has been reached regarding the original problem, schedule a time to begin the discussion again.

Sometimes, despite our best efforts, a disagreement or conflict seems insurmountable. When this occurs, talking with a trained professional can help. The University Human Resources, Learning & Professional Development individual **Coaching Services** can help you communicate more effectively and eventually work your way through to a solution. Contact us directly.

Resources for Managing Conflict

Books: Getting to Yes, by Roger Fisher and William Ury

The Eight Essential Steps to Conflict Resolution, by Dudley Weeks

People Skills: How to Assert Yourself, Listen to Others, and Resolve Conflicts, by Robert Bolton

Emotional Intelligence, by Daniel Goleman

The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People, by Stephen R. Covey

Website: Conflict Resolution Network, www.crnhq.org

Office of Training and Organizational Development Courses:

- Resolving Conflict in Professional Relationships
- Assertive Communication Skills
- Listening Skills
- Negotiating Skills
- Influencing Others to Get What You Want
- Managing Difficult Conversations
- What is Your EQ? An Introduction to Emotional Intelligence

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