

DEALING WITH CONFLICT

People frequently identify the prospect of conflict with others, or the need to mediate conflict between individuals, as one of the most difficult things they do.

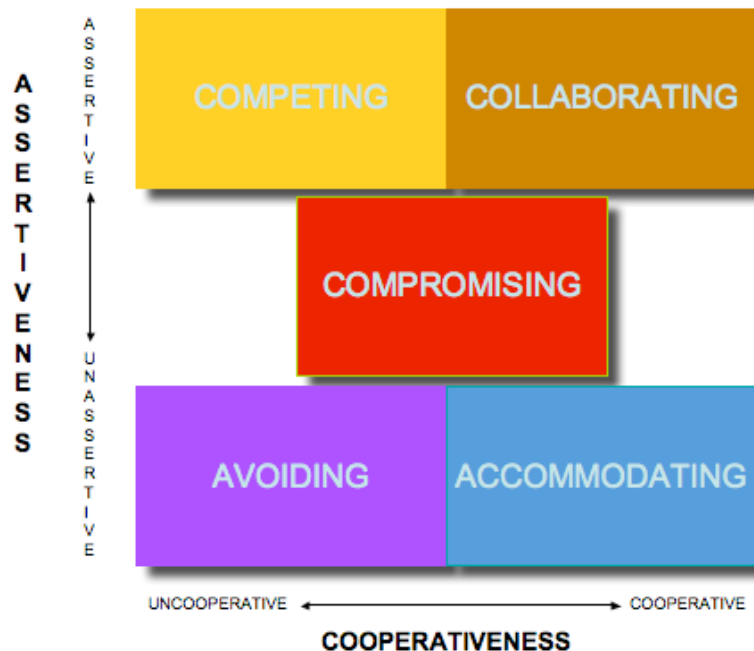
One definition of conflict describes it as *an expressed struggle between two interdependent parties who perceive they have incompatible goals, scarce resources, and interference from others in achieving their goals*. This definition identifies several important characteristics of conflict:

- **It's expressed** – parties in conflict are only *in* conflict if they know they have a disagreement.
- **Goals appear incompatible** – participants typically look at conflicts as situations where there is a winner and loser. This isn't necessarily the case - people in conflict can often find creative solutions that produce mutually satisfactory results.
- **Resources are perceived to be scarce** – individuals in conflict often believe there isn't enough of something – time, money, staff, etc. – to go around. So conflict can be seen as a way of competing for scarce resources.
- **Individuals in conflict are interdependent** – Typically, we're in conflict because one person has taken action that affects another's well-being and/or satisfaction. People in conflict *need each other to take action* to reach a resolution – if they didn't, they wouldn't be in conflict.

The fact of the matter is that conflict is natural and inevitable – people disagree over all kinds of things, trivial and important, tangible and intangible. The fact that we disagree is natural, normal, and essentially neutral. The way we deal with conflict is what can produce negative or positive feelings and results.

How we handle conflict

Our approach to handling conflict depends on two factors – the extent to which we're prepared to **assert** our needs, beliefs and positions – and the degree to which we're willing to **cooperate** with others to meet our mutual needs. There are 5 different conflict handling styles – each represents a different balance between assertiveness and cooperativeness; they're shown in the following table, and explained in more detail on the following page.



CONFLICT STYLE

USE WHEN...

COMPETING

Competing is assertive and uncooperative, a power oriented mode. The individual pursues his/her own concerns at the expense of others, using whatever power seems appropriate to win. Competing might mean standing up for your rights, defending a position you believe is correct, or simply trying to win.

- Quick decisive action is essential – as in an emergency
- When important but unpopular issues need implementing
- On issues that are vital to organizational welfare, when you know you are right
- To protect yourself against people who take advantage of uncompetitive behaviour.

ACCOMMODATING

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

- When you realize you're wrong, to allow a better solution to be considered, to learn from others, and to show you're reasonable
- When the issue is much more important to the other person than you
- When continued competition will only damage your cause
- To facilitate employee development by allowing for experimentation and learning from mistakes

AVOIDING

Avoiding is unassertive and uncooperative. An individual who is *avoiding* does not immediately pursue his or her concerns or those of the other person. Avoiding might be sidestepping an issue, postponing it until a better time, or simply withdrawing from a threatening situation.

- When an issue is trivial or there are more pressing concerns
- When you see no chance of resolving your concerns
- To allow people to cool down
- When gathering more information will produce a better resolution
- When others can resolve the issue more effectively

COLLABORATING

Collaborating is 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 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. Collaborating between two people might take the form of exploring a disagreement to learn from each other's insights, with the goal of resolving some situation that would otherwise have them competing for resources. It might also involve confronting and trying to find a creative solution to an interpersonal problem.

- To find an integrative solution where both parties' concerns are too important to be compromised
- When your objective is to learn – to test your assumptions or understand others' perspectives
- To gain commitment by achieving consensus
- To work through hard feelings that have been interfering with interpersonal relationships

COMPROMISING

Compromising is intermediate in both assertiveness and cooperativeness. The objective of a compromise is to find an expedient, mutually acceptable solution that partially satisfies both parties. Compromising falls on a middle ground between competing and accommodating. It gives up more than competing but less than accommodating. It addresses an issue more directly than avoiding, but not in as much depth as collaborating. It might mean splitting the difference, exchanging concessions, or seeking a quick, middle ground position.

- When goals are moderately important but not worth the potential disruption of a more assertive mode
- To achieve temporary settlement of complex issues
- To arrive at an expedient solution under time pressure
- As a backup mode when collaboration or competition fails
- When the two conflicted parties are strongly committed to mutually exclusive goals

How to resolve conflict

1. **Acknowledge it.** Identify the issue and discuss where each of you stands in relation to it. You have to reach agreement on the problem before you can proceed to the next step. To facilitate your discussion:
 - Discuss how you feel about the issue. Describe your concerns objectively, but get them on the table. They're just as important as the facts of the situation as far as fully resolving the conflict is concerned.
 - Focus on action, behaviour and results, rather than evaluating, labeling or accusing an individual.
 - Talk about the conflict as a mutual problem you both need to solve, as opposed to a contest one or the other of you needs to win or lose.
 - Define the conflict in the simplest and most direct way possible.
2. **Generate a list of possible solutions.** The best approach to doing this quickly and objectively is to brainstorm all the possible alternatives that can resolve the issue. *Don't evaluate any alternatives until you've listed all the ones you can think of.*
3. **Select the "best" solution(s).** Review your list and discuss the pros and cons of each alternative. Weigh the amount of effort involved in implementing an alternative against its effectiveness resolving the conflict. Sometimes it's difficult to do this, because each of you has assumed a *position* on an issue under conflict. For example, your employee might feel "We should allow staff to take breaks whenever they feel like it" while you believe "We need to take breaks at specific times." You'll find it much easier to select a workable alternative if your evaluation and decision are based on how effectively the ideal solution meets your *mutual interests*. Using our example, you might agree these interests include:
 - A desire to relieve stress
 - The need for scheduling flexibility
 - The need for a certain level of staff availability at all (or peak) timesIf you both use these mutual interests as your selection criteria, you're more likely to find it easier to arrive at a solution both of you can live with.
4. **Plan how you'll implement the solution.** Develop an action plan that specifies what each of you have agreed to do, how you'll do it, and when you'll do it. Be specific, and agree how you'll track progress. Put all of this *in writing* – this will help you both remember what you agreed to, and help you resolve any concerns that arise as you carry out your plan.
5. **Evaluate the results and your approach.** Agree to meet at some point after you've implemented your solution to evaluate the results. Did you achieve what you set out to do? If not, what action (if any) should you take now, to do so? Also, evaluate the approach you took to dealing with your conflict - how well did it work, and how, if at all, could you have improved it?

There are significant benefits to effective resolution of conflicts that go beyond the achievement of mutually acceptable results. They include improved interpersonal relationships, better communication, better problem solving processes, and improved understanding of one another's needs and values.

On the following pages, you'll find a number of typical conflict situations that relate to concrete and intangible issues, along with approaches for you to consider in dealing with them.

Tangible Issues

These are issues that involve some sort of measurable, observable concern, including limited resources, behaviour or conduct, and information (or the lack of it).

LIMITED RESOURCES

“We don’t have enough money/time/staff/equipment for this.”

ASK YOURSELF

- What’s the real issue here? Why are one or the other of us assuming this *position*? Is it because of limited resources, or that a symptom of a larger or different problem?
- What are my interests in resolving this issue?
- How can we meet them?

ASK OTHERS TO...

- To state their case – what are their concerns?
- Identify the needs a good solution could meet (their interests)
- Discuss how those needs can best be met to your mutual satisfaction

NUISANCES/ANNOYING HABITS/BEHAVIOUR

Personal phone calls, constantly interrupting people, consistently late, disorganized, disruptive, disheveled, grooming problems...

ASK YOURSELF

- How am I reacting to this? Am I letting the situation control my behaviour? Should I?
- How is this affecting others?
- How can I raise this concern without offending the individual?

TO RESOLVE THE SITUATION...

- Provide formative feedback – focus on the impact to you, others and the consequences to the individual
- Provide motivational feedback and recognition when performance improves
- If there is no improvement, repeat the formative feedback and or escalate the concern. When you escalate, be sure to inform and include the individual in the escalation process

INCORRECT OR INCOMPLETE INFORMATION OR FACTS

“What you said is not what happened...”

ASK YOURSELF

- Do we all have access to the same information?
- Does everyone have a common understanding of the information?
- Who is providing this information?

ASK OTHERS TO...

- Clarify their understanding of the situation
- Ask them to provide their rationales, sources of information

Intangible Issues

These are conflicts that arise from differences in values, attitudes and beliefs. These can be more difficult to deal with than tangible issues. You may be able to motivate an individual to change their behaviour, but you're less likely to be able to change their underlying values or attitudes.

PERSONAL OR RELATIONSHIP NEEDS ARE NOT BEING MET

"I feel I'm being attacked, don't feel in control, respected, or involved..."

ASK YOURSELF	TO ADDRESS THE SITUATION...
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Am I letting others influence how I feel about myself?• Does someone see me as a threat, or misunderstand what I've said or intend?• Have I done things in the past that have resulted in longer-term resentment?• Am I or is someone else trying to even a score?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Don't allow others to control how you feel about yourself, but check to see what it is that is contributing to their perception• Clarify your perception with the other(s) involved• Provide feedback that explains the impact of what someone has done or said to produce this situation• Make every effort to salvage relationships that are worth keeping

DIFFERENT VALUES

Politics, religion, ethics, morals, etc...

ASK YOURSELF	TO ADDRESS THE SITUATION...
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Do others have the same values as me?• Does everyone think the same way as I do?• Have I been effective in communicating my values?• Have I taken the time to learn about others' values?• Does our difference in values matter as much as we seem to think it does?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Share your values with others, and learn about theirs• Understand that you may not be able to change others' values – or your own. You may need to agree to disagree• Focus on behaviour – which you and others can change

INCOMPATIBLE GOALS AND APPROACHES

Different agendas, objectives, and methods...

ASK YOURSELF	TO ADDRESS THE SITUATION...
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What do we need to achieve?• Do our personal goals and approaches conflict with this?• How do we differ, and what are the consequences, if any?• Will different approaches achieve the same result?• Do our different approaches both/all meet the operational requirements/policies/ regulations?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Discuss your goals and approaches• Consider the possibility that none of them is wrong only different• Restate goals, objectives and desired approaches and see how individual objectives and approaches "fit"• Consider each others' perspectives and rationales• Discuss potential risks and consequences



Chris Hutcheson is the President of IDEA Ltd. Since 1987 he has provided training and related consulting services to a variety of public and private sector clients, ranging from small social service organizations to several of Canada's "big five" banks.

Chris is the author of the Learning Style Questionnaire, a tool to measure learning preferences, published by HRD Press. It is currently part of the required reading for several programs at the University of Oklahoma, and is in use in numerous other organizations.

He has worked with and developed a variety of multi-rater assessments, surveys, and follow up processes to assess and facilitate development of skills in performance management, coaching, and quality of work climate.

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