

Responses to Conflict

The modes of responding to conflict are described in five groups. They are categorized in two dimensions: the level of assertiveness, concern about self and the level of co-operation, concern about others.

Each mode of responding to conflict is useful in some situations and each mode has limitations. Most of us use each of these responses depending on the situation. Problems can result if we overuse certain responses or choose a response inappropriate for the circumstances.

Avoiding is the most unassertive and unco-operative. The person does not address the conflict and does not pursue their own concerns or the other person's. Avoiding might take the form of postponing an issue until a better time or place, sidestepping an issue, or withdrawing from an uncomfortable situation.

Competing is assertive and unco-operative. The person advances their own cause at the expense of the other person. This mode is oriented in the use of power to win - whatever power is available - whether economic, based on position or the ability to advocate well. This might take the form of defending a position you feel is right, standing up for your rights, or trying to overwhelm the other person in order to win.

Accommodating is the opposite of competing. This mode is co-operative and unassertive. The person is so concerned with satisfying the other person that they neglect their own concerns. This might take the form of doing what you're told to do even if you do not agree, or selfless generosity.

Compromising is mid-level in both assertion and co-operativeness. Compromising might mean "splitting the difference", trading concessions or finding a quick middle ground solution.

Collaborating is high in assertion and in co-operation, the opposite of avoiding. This involves working with the other person to find a solution which satisfies the concerns of both. This might take the form of finding a way to resolve a situation which might otherwise have you competing with others for resources or finding a creative solution to an interpersonal problem.

Conflict: Can't live with it, Can't live without it

What is one of the biggest causes of stress in the workplace? Ask anyone who works with other people. Whether the number of people in the workplace is large or small, conflict is likely to be part of their answer. At the best, conflict leads to a search for solutions and results in positive change. At the worst, the resulting upset and anger can be exhibited as "workplace rage."

"There's no conflict in my company," I was told by an owner of a company with about 40 employees. After getting more information about conflict he changed his mind. "There's only a problem if you don't see it my way" and "Talking about problems makes them worse" are examples of attitudes to conflict which are not helpful in getting a situation resolved.

The avoided conflict will not go away even if everyone tries to avoid it. A likely result of avoiding conflict will be built up resentment, feelings displaced onto other people or things, and more frequent griping, back-biting and discontent.

We all have attitudes and beliefs about conflict from our childhood and cultural background. These attitudes inform our perceptions of a situation. When a conflict occurs we respond based on those attitudes and perceptions. The consequence of our response to conflict

leads to our experience of conflict. This experience becomes part of the circle which continues building our attitudes and beliefs, developing our perceptions and informing the way we respond to the next conflict that occurs. The attitude most helpful for resolution is that conflict is neutral - neither good nor bad. It is part of life with other people. We can not stop conflict. We can change the way we respond to conflict. Reacting in a different way to conflict may lead us to the consequence of de-escalation, resolution and a better relationship rather than stress, escalation, and hurt feelings. We can teach ourselves that conflict does not have to be a bad experience. We can learn and apply methods to deal effectively with conflict.



As Joel Edelman and Mary Beth Crain wrote in The Tao of Negotiation, "Conflict, after all, is just another form of human energy. When we talk about conflict we're really talking about life."

Munn-thly Memo

Question:

I am the Human Resources Manager of a medium-sized manufacturing company. I recently fired an employee for performance-related reasons. The employee was paid the amount required as notice under the (Ontario) Employment Standards Act. The former employee has hired a lawyer and I recently received a letter from the lawyer suggesting mediation. There is no lawsuit started but I expect that this employee will likely sue the company. Will mediation work for this? What would be involved?

Answer:

Mediation will work in a situation where both parties are willing to talk even if they think it is unlikely that the situation can be resolved. Mediation can be used whether or not a court action has been started. Generally my experience is that after the parties decide they cannot get the situation resolved themselves, the earlier I am hired to provide mediation services, the easier and faster it is for them to resolve the situation. The converse also applies. It gets harder to resolve the situation after the parties have spent time and money fighting each other.

I suggest that you discuss this with your company's lawyer if you have not already done so.

If you decide to use mediation the first step is to select a mediator with the agreement of the former employee's lawyer. Considerations in selecting a mediator were described in detail in the May, 1999 issue of Common Ground.

The mediator will likely ask both parties or their lawyers some questions to determine whether they both agree to mediation and whether mediation is appropriate for the problem involved. Both

parties will likely be asked to sign a Mediation Agreement which will deal with such issues as confidentiality in the mediation session, other guidelines for the mediation and payment for the mediator.

You will need to consider whether to attend the mediation with the company's lawyer, with another representative of the company or on your own. Your authority to settle the case must be clearly defined with the company. If you will need to check with someone before settling, you should try to have that person attend the mediation session. If this is not possible, then it is important for you to arrange to be able to contact the decision-maker during the mediation. You should also tell the mediator about this limitation on your authority to settle.

The mediator may ask both parties to provide some information in advance. This varies with the mediator and with the complexity of the situation. For example, if there is an employment contract, it may be helpful for the mediator to read the contract in advance. Whether or not you provide information in advance, bring all the relevant information to the mediation.

Dispute • Conflict

"Conflict is process; a dispute may be one of several products of conflict. Conflict is the process of expressing disagreement, or unmet expectations with an organizational interchange; a dispute is one of the products of conflict."

Designing Conflict Management Systems
by Cathy Costantino and Christina Merchant

Mark Your Calendar

Upcoming Training Events Presented by Kathryn Munn

June 1 and 2, 1999

Communication from Conflict to Consensus The Management Centre, Lambton College, Sarnia
9:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.
Call (519)542-7751 Ext 505
for more information

June 7 and 14, 1999

Negotiating from Discord to Harmony
London Community Small Business Centre
9:00 a.m. to noon
Open to not-for-profit organizations only
Call the London Entrepreneurial Education
Associaton at (519) 659-4295
for more informaiton

June 16 and 17, 1999

Conflict Resolution
The Management Centre, Lambton College,
Sarnia 9:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.
Call (519)542-7751 Ext 505
for more information

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