

Managing Conflict in the Workplace¹

Julie Gatlin, Allen Wysocki, and Karl Kepner²

Introduction

Experts agree that a number of conflict resolution styles exist (Bell, Reynolds/Kalish, Robin, and Wertheim, 2002). None are right or wrong, just different. Managers often have an innate preference for only one or two. This article will present five conflict resolution styles, illustrate how to use these conflict resolution styles strategically, and offer advice regarding the negotiation of conflict resolution.

Five Conflict Resolution Styles

According to Robin (2002), there are five conflict resolution styles: confront, compromise, collaborate, accommodate, and avoid. Identify the preference(s) you most often use from these resolution styles. Think about times you have interacted with styles other than your own. Once the differences between these styles are identified, they can be managed, and the appropriateness of when to use them can be determined.

Style 1. Confront

This approach directly addresses the conflict and is often viewed as “might makes right” (Robin, 2002). A confrontational style usually involves high emotional levels, clear clarity of both goals, weak relationship, low concern for formalities or fear of punishment, moderate concerns for traditions, and a moderate self-concept.

Style 2. Compromise

Compromise involves bargaining and mutually giving up something to reach a settlement. It can be used to get a quick resolution, with the prevention of further escalation (Robin, 2002). Compromise usually involves high to moderate emotional levels, high to low skill levels, moderate clarity of both goals, moderate status of the relationship, win-win attitude toward authority, moderate concern for traditions, and moderate fear of punishment.

Style 3. Collaborate

This involves working together to generate win-win alternatives for resolving issues (Robin, 2002). Collaborating involves high to moderate skill levels of parties, clear clarity of both goals, strong

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2. Julie Gatlin, Master of Agribusiness student; Allen Wysocki, Assistant Professor; and Karl Kepner; Department of Food and Resource Economics, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL.

status of relationships, Win-Win attitude toward authority, low concerns for formalities and traditions, and a high self-concept.

Style 4. Accommodate

This involves listening and accepting without resistance. This style is characterized by suppressed emotional levels, a high to low skill level of parties, a moderate clarity of goals of both, a weak status of relationships, a lose-win attitude toward authority, high concerns for formalities, a moderate self-concept, and a high fear of punishment.

Style 5. Avoid

This involves not addressing the conflict. Avoidance is characterized by a controlled emotional level, a high to low skill levels of parties, a lose-win attitude toward authority, high concern for formalities and traditions, a low self concept, and a high fear of punishment.

Conflict Resolution Styles Used as Strategies

The five conflict resolution styles (confront, collaborate, compromise, accommodate, and avoid) can be used strategically in three specific ways when dealing with conflict. These three strategies are engage, do not engage, and negotiate.

Engage Strategy

An engage strategy would be used when the situation allows for confronting, compromising, or collaborating (Robin, 2002).

In confrontations, the engage strategy can be aggressive but not hostile, because the outcome should be a win-win situation for all parties. If hostile feelings remain, consider using another strategy.

Because compromise involves negotiating for a mutually desirable outcome, the engage strategy means putting differences aside and working together for an agreeable solution.

When using the engage strategy for collaboration, working as a team is important. Everyone is responsible for input and has a voice in the decision making process.

Do-Not-Engage Strategy

A do-not-engage strategy is appropriate when situations allow for accommodating and avoiding. Not engaging does not mean the same as resisting or being defensive, it is a conscious and deliberate choice not to be adversarial (Robin, 2002).

The do-not-engage strategy is effective in accommodating because the issue is less important than the relationship. For example, suppose a farm has ordered several tons of feed per week from your company, which it wants delivered on a day your company does not make deliveries to that area. In this instance, you may want to make special delivery arrangements since the delivery issue is less important than the large account relationship.

With avoidance, the do-not-engage strategy is one that does not pursue any party's particular concerns. It is appropriate to use when there is no way for anyone to win or the situation needs a "cooling off" period. For example, this strategy might be most effective when management is not present to make a decision or when emotions are too high or alcohol use is involved.

Negotiate Strategy

It is important to know when and how to negotiate. There are several styles of negotiation. Consider using negotiation for confronting, compromising, or collaborating.

The best time to negotiate is whenever you can make the opponents offers they may find more attractive than the next-best alternative. The following is a list of appropriate times to negotiate (Robin, 2002):

- When you must make a decision and there are no better alternatives.
- When the task or issue is important (if it is not, either let it go or lead strongly).
- When you are in a position to explore other options.
- When not negotiating would cost you, or you have something to gain.

- When there has been a misunderstanding, or no understanding or agreement.
- When you would prefer to openly discuss differences.
- To be a model by demonstrating what effective negotiation is all about.

There are many types of negotiators. Being aware of an associate's (employee's) negotiating style can help the conflict resolution process. Following are some of the types of negotiators suggested by E. Werthiem, PhD. (2002):

- *The aggressive*: makes cutting remarks about the opponent's past performance or unreasonableness or makes statements that imply that the opponent is inferior and unimportant.
- *The long pauser*: uses long silences for the purpose of eliciting revealing information from the opponent.
- *The mocking negotiator*: antagonizes the opponent to elicit responses that will later be regretted.
- *The interrogator*: challenges all answers in a confrontational manner and continues to demand further details.
- *The cloak of reasonableness*: appears to be reasonable while making impossible demands for the purpose of winning the opponent's confidence while undermining him.
- *Divide and conquer*: used when negotiating with a group to create dissension among opponents so that opponents are distracted by internal disagreements rather than the issue at-hand.
- *The "act dumb" negotiator*: pretends not to understand the issue so that the opponent, or opponents, will become so exasperated that he, or someone in the group, will accidentally reveal information.

Conclusion

Managers and associates continually face conflict in the workplace. Using the five conflict resolution styles and knowing when to use them makes resolving differences easier.

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