

Learning Package Three

Personality Differences and Conflict Handling Styles

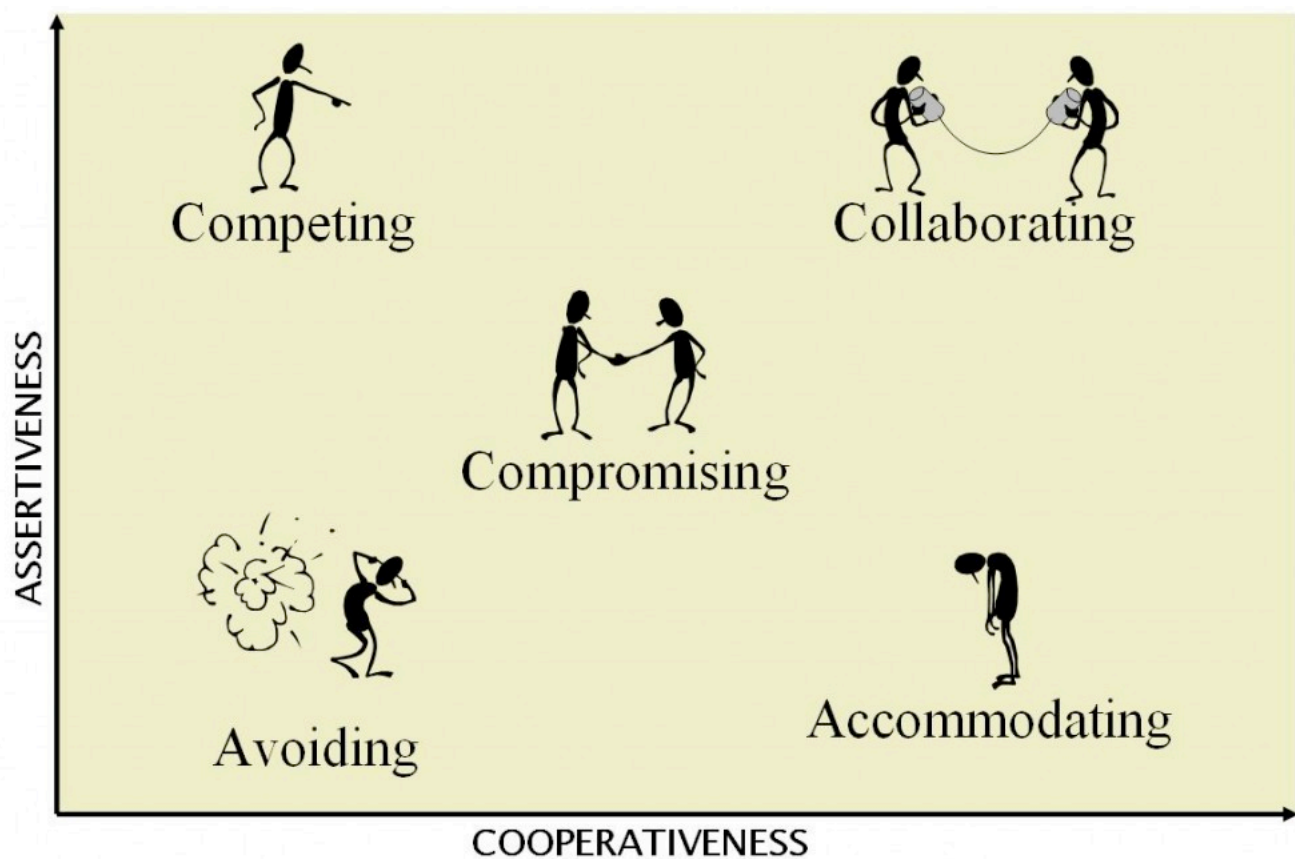


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This module examines our different approaches to responding to and managing conflict, based on our personality and learned behaviours.

- Understanding the theory of conflict handling styles
- In what ways does personality affect the way people handle conflict?
- How we behave when in conflict

We all deal with conflict in different ways. In part this variation is dependent on our upbringing, our life experiences and the efforts we have made towards our personal growth and development. But it is also largely influenced by our personality.

Most of us use conflict skills that we observed growing up, unless we have made a conscious effort to change our conflict management style. Some of us observed good conflict management, while others observed faulty conflict management. Most of us have several reasons to improve our conflict-management skills.

Our value systems are an important factor influencing how we react to and deal with issues with other people. The importance one person places on a particular desired outcome may be very different to the value another person places on the same issue. And the habits we have learnt can govern the way we respond when faced with conflict. Often children learn a set of behaviours and reactions from their parents or caregivers; they learn from watching how these significant adults solve problems or negotiate outcomes.

Some personalities deal with conflict in an open and comfortable manner and others avoid it. Studies show that people with a passive aggressive personality tend to actively avoid conflict and feel uncomfortable confronting others in a conflictual context. These people feel angry or frustrated but are not comfortable expressing that emotion. Emotions which are suppressed for too long may erupt when control weakens and typically there is an outburst in a moment of heat and stress.

Although conflict can be both functional and dysfunctional, unresolved conflict results in dissatisfaction and stress, thus reducing efficiency and productivity. Some personalities

enhance relationships, and others harm relationships. Some solve the conflict/others increase it.

Understanding the Theory: Conflict Styles

In the 1970s Kenneth Thomas and Ralph Kilmann identified five main styles of dealing with conflict that vary in their degrees of cooperativeness and assertiveness. They argued that people typically have a preferred conflict resolution style. However they also noted that different styles were most useful in different situations. They developed the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI) which helps you to identify which style you tend towards when conflict arises.

Thomas and Kilmann's styles are described as:

Competitive: People who tend towards a competitive style take a firm stand, and know what they want. Typically they pursue their own goals at another person's expense. They usually operate from a position of power, drawn from things like position, rank, expertise, or persuasive ability. We often say that a competitive style is where someone "stands up for their rights". This style can be useful when a decision needs to be made quickly; when the decision is unpopular; or when defending against someone who is trying to exploit the situation selfishly. However it can leave people feeling bruised, unsatisfied and resentful when used in less urgent situations.

Accommodating: This style indicates a willingness to meet the needs of others at the expense of the person's own needs. A person with this style is both Unassertive and Cooperative – which is the opposite of competing. The accommodator often knows when to give in to others, but can be persuaded to surrender a position even when it is not warranted. Accommodation is appropriate when the issues matter more to the other party, when peace is more valuable than winning, or when you want to be in a position to collect on this "favour" you gave. However people may not return favours, and overall this approach is unlikely to give the best outcomes.

Avoiding: People tending towards this style seek to evade the conflict entirely. They are Unassertive and Uncooperative. This style is typified by delegating controversial decisions,

accepting default decisions, and not wanting to hurt anyone's feelings. It can be appropriate when victory is impossible, when the controversy is trivial, or when someone else is in a better position to solve the problem. A person with this style will typically postpone dealing with a problem or sidestep dealing with it at all. In many situations this is a weak and ineffective approach to take. When we avoid conflict we are neither trying to achieve results nor addressing relationships with other people. We simply do not want to deal with the conflict.

Collaborative: People tending towards a collaborative style try to meet the needs of all people involved. They are both Assertive and Collaborative. These people can be highly assertive but unlike the competitor, they cooperate effectively and acknowledge that everyone is important. This style is useful when you need to bring together a variety of viewpoints to get the best solution; when there has been a history of previous conflicts in the group; or when the situation is too important for a simple trade-off. Collaborating may take the form of exploring the disagreement in an open and frank way or trying to find creative solutions to a problem.

Compromising: People who prefer a compromising style try to find a solution that will at least partially satisfy everyone. In some situations it may mean the parties making concessions or seeking a middle-ground solution. The aim is to find some mutually acceptable solution which will partially satisfy the parties. Compromise is useful when the cost of conflict is higher than the cost of losing ground, when equal strength opponents are at a standstill and when there is a deadline looming. When people compromise, each person partially meets the other's demands. Compromising sometimes means sacrificing important needs. It is not unusual for both people to walk away unsatisfied from a compromise.

The effect of personality and conflict management style was explored by researcher David Antonioni (1998), who found that outgoing, conscientious, agreeable and open people tend to handle conflict in a positive way. This research indicated that such personality traits rarely used Avoidance Styles conflict management, but usually found a constructive and assertive way to deal with conflict in their relationships.

Importantly, there is no perfect style of managing conflict. Each situation calls for a specific approach which is best for the context.

Personal Preferences for Conflict Resolution

There are three main ways in which people respond to others at times of conflict:

- Passive
- Aggressive
- Assertive

The **Passive** approach adopts a submissive form of behaviour, in which conflict is avoided and this then allows conflict to escalate, due to the issues not being addressed. Passive people often express their resentment to other people, and try to enlist the support of others.

Aggressive approaches can work in the short term, as people can be bullied into accepting an outcome. Rarely is an aggressive approach likely to be a long term solution, as those who have been forced into submission are likely to be resentful.

Assertive approaches are likely to produce lasting resolution, as this is the style where there is open dialogue between the parties and a desire for all parties' needs to be met. There is an honest admission of what each person's needs are and a focus on fair outcomes.

Fit the Style to the Situation

Once you understand the different styles, you can use that information to think about the most appropriate approach (or mixture of approaches) for the situation you're in. You can also think about your own instinctive approach, and learn how you need to change this if necessary.

Assess the situation and decide which approach is most likely to deliver the desired outcome.

Ideally you can adopt an approach that meets the situation, resolves the problem, respects people's legitimate interests, and mends damaged working relationships.

How might you select an appropriate conflict management style?

There are times when we have a choice to engage in or avoid a conflict. The following six variables should be considered when you decide whether to engage in a conflict.

1. How invested in the relationship are you?

The importance of the relationship often determines whether you will engage in a conflict. If you value the person and/or the relationship, going through the process of conflict resolution is important.

2. How important is the issue to you?

Even if the relationship is not of great value to you, the issue may be important to you. For example, if the issue is a belief, value, or regulation that you believe in or are required to enforce, then engaging in and dealing with the conflict is necessary. If the relationship and the issue are both important to you, there is an even more compelling reason to engage in the conflict.

3. Do you have the energy for the conflict?

Recognise that dealing with the issue may take time and energy. Often the issue is not how much time is available but how much energy we have for what we need to do. It can make a difference if you prepare for this expenditure in a realistic way and if necessary gain additional support or resources before tackling the issues.

4. Be aware of the potential consequences

Prior to engaging in a conflict, thinking about anticipated consequences from engaging in the conflict is wise. For example, there may be a risk for your safety, a risk for job loss, or an opportunity for a better working relationship. Thoughtful reflection about the consequences, both positive and negative, is useful before engaging in or avoiding a conflict. Generally, the benefits will far outweigh the negative consequences.

5. Are you ready for the consequences?

After analysing potential consequences, determine whether you are prepared for the consequences of engaging in the conflict. For example, one remote area employee anticipated a job loss if she continued to engage in the conflict she was having with her boss over a particular issue. After careful consideration, the employee thought and believed strongly enough about the issue that she did decide to confront the issue with her supervisor. Her annual contract was not renewed for the next year. Because this individual had thought

through the consequences of engaging in the conflict, she was prepared to be without a job (as well as needing to relocate) and was able to financially and emotionally plan for this outcome. Most consequences of engaging in conflict are not this severe, but this example illustrates the value of thinking through consequences.

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

For reasons of personal integrity, there are times when you must engage in conflict. Most people have core values, ideas, beliefs, or morals. If a person is going to sacrifice one of their core beliefs by avoiding a conflict, personal loss of respect must be considered. In such cases, even if a person is not excited about confronting the conflict, they must carefully consider the consequences of avoiding the conflict. When the personal consequences of turning away from the conflict outweigh all other factors, then a person usually must take part in the conflict.

Exercise Three

Determine your own personality style and typical approach to conflict.

Armed with this knowledge, analyse how you typically handle conflict both at work and in your personal life.

What are your strengths in the way you handle conflict?

What could fruitfully be changed?

Which specific Style of Conflict Management is most likely to be effective in your workplace?

Reference

Antonioni, D (1998) "*Relationship Between The Big Five Personality Factors And Conflict Management Styles*", International Journal of Conflict Management, Vol. 9 Iss: 4, pp.336 – 355