

## Problem Solving Information and Tips

### Topics

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### Principles for Addressing Conflict

Following are some principles that will help you address a problem you have with the person directly.

- **Pay attention to your emotions and how they influence you.** Realize that emotions are part of the academic environment and that negative emotions can fuel the conflict. Acknowledge your emotion and then determine its source – is it based on a bad experience or a past interaction that may be influencing the current situation? Is it based on something you have no control over? While you may not always be able to control your feelings generated by stress or other reasons, you should make every effort to control the disruptive emotions that your feelings may trigger. Sometimes taking a “time out” may be helpful when feeling overwhelmed by emotions.
- **Consciously decide how to respond to a conflict situation.** Most people remember how you respond to a situation rather than what happened. While you often do not have control of many situations, you can choose how to respond to others to help reduce work conflict and stress. By responding appropriately to a conflict situation, you take responsibility for your actions. Refer to [Understanding Conflict Handling Styles](#) to discover the advantages and disadvantages for each style.
- **Give yourself time to prepare.** You should address difficult issues after you have had time to organize your thoughts. Take the time to understand and be clear about what your real concern is. Ask yourself, “What is the underlying reason or the ‘why’ behind what I want?” Refer to [Focus on Interests \(Needs\), Not Positions \(Wants\)](#) for more information.
- **Consider timing to help you listen.** Do you have enough time to listen to another person’s point of view and then have time to discuss the issue? Listening is hard when you are upset. Do not listen only to hear what you expect the other person to say or for what will confirm your viewpoint. Listen with an open mind and paraphrase what the other person says to check and communicate that you understand. Refer to [Listening Effectively](#) for tips on how to listen.
- **Use “I” messages to express your concerns in a non-confrontational way.** Talk from your perspective to clarify your issues, feelings, or opinions. “I” messages place the responsibility on you and include three components: 1) your personal reaction/feeling, 2) a description of the situation/action, and 3) the impact/consequence from your

perspective. “You” messages focus the blame on the other person and they are likely to elicit a negative or defensive response.

- **Frame the issue in terms of interests.** Frame the discussion appropriately by clearly disclosing your interests so the other person can hear what you are saying. Then ask powerful questions to better define the problem for the two of you to address together. The best questions are open-ended questions rather than questions that require a “yes” or “no” reply or a short answer. Good questions include “Tell me more about ....” “How would that work in this situation?” Be careful starting a question with “why” as it may provide a defensive response. Refer to [How to Identify Interests](#) for help on questions.
- **Focus on what you can change – the future.** Discussion about what happened in the past and providing examples may be necessary for understanding, but it is not to convince the other person about your rightness or to defend yourself. Focus on how you can both work more productively in the future.
- **Recognize that other viewpoints are possible and likely.** Although you feel differently about the situation, the other person’s feelings are real and legitimate to them. Denying their existence is likely to escalate the situation. Remember, it is difficult to find solutions without first agreeing on the problem. If you do not understand the other person’s viewpoint, you run the risk of not solving the right problem which could make the conflict worse.
- **Identify ways to resolve the problem with the other person.** By involving the other person in resolving the conflict, you gain his or her commitment and develop a stronger working relationship.

Source: CDR Associates, *Conflict Resolution for Managers and Leaders*, John Wiley & Sons, 2007 and Craig Runde and Tim Flanagan, *Becoming a Conflict Competent Leader*, John Wiley & Sons, 2007.

## Understanding Conflict Handling Styles

In a dispute, it's often easier to describe how others respond than to how we respond. Each of us has a predominant conflict style that we use to meet our own needs. By examining conflict styles and the consequences of those behaviors, we can gain a better understanding of the impact that our personal conflict style has on other people. With a better understanding, you then can make a conscious choice on how to respond to others in a conflict situation to help reduce work conflict and stress.

Behavioral scientists Kenneth Thomas and Ralph Kilmann, who developed the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument, have identified five styles to responding to conflict—competition, collaboration, compromise, avoidance, and accommodation. No conflict style is inherently right or wrong, but one or more styles could be inappropriate for a given situation and the impact could result in a situation quickly spiraling out of control.

### 1. Competing

**Value of own issue/goal:** High

**Value of relationship:** Low

**Goal:** I win, you lose

People who consistently use a competitive style come across as aggressive, autocratic, confrontational, and intimidating. A competitive style is an attempt to gain power and pressure a change at the other person's expense. A competitive style of managing conflict can be appropriate when you have to implement an unpopular decision, make a quick decision, the decision is vital in a crisis, or it is important to let others know how important an issue is to you – "standing up for your right." The biggest disadvantage of using this style is that relationships can be harmed beyond repair and may encourage other parties to use covert methods to get their needs met because conflict with these people are reduced to – "if you are not with me, you are against me."

### 2. Accommodating

**Value of own issue/goal:** Low

**Value relationship:** High

**Goal:** I lose, you win

By accommodating you set aside your own personal needs because you want to please others in order to keep the peace. The emphasis is on preserving the relationship. Smoothing or harmonizing can result in a false solution to a problem and can create feelings in a person that range from anger to pleasure. Accommodators are unassertive and cooperative and may play the role of a martyr, complainer, or saboteur. However, accommodation can be useful when one is wrong or when you want to minimize losses when you are going to lose anyway because it preserves relationships. If you use it all the time it can become competitive – "I am nicer than

you are" – and may result in reduced creativity in conflict situations and increased power imbalances.

### **3. Avoiding**

**Value of own issue/goal:** Low

**Value of relationship:** Low

**Goal:** I lose, you lose

Avoidance is characterized by deliberately ignoring or withdrawing from a conflict rather than facing it. This style may be perceived as not caring about your own issue or the issues of others. People who avoid the situation hope the problem will go away, resolve itself without their involvement, or think that others are ready to take the responsibility. There are situations where avoidance is appropriate such as when you need more time to think of how to respond, time constraints demand a delay, confrontation will hurt a working relationship, or there is little chance of satisfying your needs. However, avoidance can be destructive if the other person perceives that you don't care enough to engage. By not dealing with the conflict, this style allows the conflict to simmer and heat up unnecessarily, resulting in anger or a negative outburst.

### **4. Compromising**

**Value of own issue/goal:** Medium

**Value of relationship:** Medium

**Goal:** I win some, you win some

The compromising style demonstrates that you are willing to sacrifice some of your goals while persuading others to give up part of theirs – give a little, get a little. Compromising maintains the relationship and can take less time than collaboration and resolutions might mean splitting the difference or seeking a middle ground position. The downside to compromising is that it can be an easy way out and reduces new creative options. If you constantly split the difference or "straddle the fence," game playing can result and the outcome could be less than ideal.

### **5. Collaborating**

**Value of own issue/goal:** High

**Value of relationship:** High

**Goal:** I win, you win

The collaborative style views conflicts as problems to be solved and finding creative solutions that satisfy all the parties' concerns. You don't give up your self interest; you dig into the issue to identify the underlying concerns, test your own assumptions, and understand the views of others. Collaboration takes time and if the relationship among the parties is not important, then it may not be worth the time and energy to create a win-win solution. However,

collaboration fosters respect, trust, and builds relationships. To make an environment more collaborative, address the conflict directly and in a way that expresses willingness for all parties to get what they need.

Although all of the approaches have their time and place, you need to ask yourself the basic question, "Is my preferred conflict handling style the very best I can use to resolve this conflict or solve this problem?"

Source: Thomas, K. W. and R.H. Kilmann, [Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument](#)

### **Focus on Interests (Needs), Not Positions (Wants)**

Understanding people's interests is not a simple task because we tend to communicate our positions – things that are likely to be concrete and explicit. It is helpful to learn to recognize the difference between person's positions and interests to assist in creative problem solving.

- Positions are predetermined solutions or demands that people use to describe what they want – what the person wants to happen on a particular issue.  
For example: "I want ....."
- Interests define the problem and may be intangible, unexpressed, or not consistent. They are the main reasons why you say what you want – the motivation behind the position. The conflict is usually between each person's needs, desire, concern, or fear.

Remember that figuring out your interests is just as important as figuring out their interests.

### **How to Identify Interests**

To identify interests of the other person, you need to ask questions to determine what the person believes he or she truly needs. When you ask, be sure to clarify that you are not asking questions for justification of their position, but for a better understanding of their needs, fears, hopes, and desires.

Using open-ended questions that encourage a person to "tell their story" helps you begin to understand their interest. Open ended questions are opposite of closed-ended questions, which require a response of "yes" or "no." To illustrate the difference, consider the following example:

Examples of open-ended questions:

- What's your basic concern about ...?
- Tell me about ...

- What do you think about ...?
- How could we fix ...?
- What would happen if ...?
- How else could you do ...?
- What could you tell me about ...?
- Then what?
- Could you help me understand ...?
- What do you think you will lose if you ...?
- What have you tried before?
- What do you want to do next?
- How can I be of help?

The most powerful interests for you to consider are the basic human needs for security, economic well-being, sense of belonging to an organization, identify, recognition of contribution or efforts, and autonomy or control over decisions or work. It is not uncommon for you or the other person to have multiple interests and it would be helpful for you to write them down as they occur to help you sort them out. This list may be helpful to think through ideas that may meet these interests.

Problem solving on your interests and the other person's interests leads to more creative and successful resolutions because you meet not only your need but theirs as well.

Source: Fisher, Ury, and Patton. *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In*. Houghton Mifflin, Second Edition, 1992.

### **Listening Effectively**

Problem solving requires effective listening skills. When you listen effectively, you help the person talking reduce their emotional level so they begin to think through their problem and how to resolve.

First it is important to take time to reflect on your listening behavior because it difficult to change something you are not aware of. Habits and our internal voice – the voice inside our head that talks to us while others are talking to us – can interfere with your listening and may include:

- Assuming that you know what the speaker is going to say next
- Thinking about what you are going to say when the other person stops talking
- Preoccupied with your appearance or with impressing the other
- Judging or being critical of the speaker
- Trying to look interested, but not hearing what the other person is saying
- Thinking about something else that you may need to do or daydreaming

- Tuning out because the information conflicts with your ideas and beliefs
- Interrupting so you can argue your idea or find holes in the other person's argument
- Tuning out because of how the speaker is talking – too loud, unpleasant or because the speaker is monopolizing the conversation

How we filter the information through our biases, values, emotions, meaning of words, and physical frame of mind also create barriers to effective listening. Examples include:

- Hearing what you want to hear and not what is really communicated
- Having a past negative experience with the person you are communicating with
- Anxious to hear something that fulfills your wishes or desires and results in hearing incorrectly
- Forming an opinion about the value of what is being said, i.e., too boring, too complex, nothing new, unimportant, wanting the speaker to get to the point
- The use of emotional charged words used in communication that stir up strong feelings such as "you should," "you have to," "you lack," "you never," "you always," "you fail to understand," "every time you," "you are confused," etc.
- Feeling fatigue or ill resulting in low energy
- Having your own meaning of words and expressions.

### **How to Listen Effectively**

1. Prior to the meeting, recognize and understand your emotions and theirs prior to meeting. Are you feeling nervous? Are you angry at the other person? Are you frustrated about something? Ask yourself what is causing the emotion. Are they carrying the emotion over from one issue to another? Are there personal problems from home that are interfering with work?
2. When meeting, pay attention to the speaker. Resist distractions. Put down your pen, make good eye contact, and lean forward to show your interest. Don't interrupt. Jot down notes if you want remember what you wanted to say.
3. Listen with an open, curious mind. Do not judge what the other person is saying a "wrong." Clarify the meaning by asking questions to get additional information and to help explore all sides of the problem. You can say "Please help me understand ..." or "How did you say that happened?"
4. Don't react to emotional outburst. Talk to the other side about their emotions. Talk about your own emotions. Making your feelings or theirs part of the discussion may make it less reactive and more proactive.
5. Reflect content to check your meaning with theirs, and to show you are listening and understanding. After the speaker is finished say "Did I understand you correctly that you are saying ...?" "Let me see if I have this correctly, ..." "From you point of view, the situation is ..."
6. Reflect feeling to show that you understand how they feel. This will help the other person evaluate their feelings. Examples of what you can say "You feel that..." or "It must have been frustrating to have ..."

7. Summarize to bring the discussion into focus and to serve as place to begin for further discussion. "This is what you have decided to do and the reasons why are ..."