

Managing Conflict in the Workplace¹

Julie Gatlin, Allen Wysocki, Karl Kepner, Derek Farnsworth, and Jennifer L. Clark²

Introduction

Experts agree that a number of conflict resolution styles exist (Bell 2002; Robin 2002; Wertheim 2002). None is right or wrong, just different. Managers often have an innate preference for only one or two styles. This document presents five conflict resolution styles, illustrates how to use these conflict resolution styles strategically, and offers advice on 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 your resolution style. 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



Figure 1.

Credits: Fuse/Thinkstock.com

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 status of relationships, win-win

1. This document is HR025, one of a series of the Food and Resource Economics Department, UF/IFAS Extension. Original publication date June 2002. Revised October 2015. Visit the EDIS website at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>.

2. Julie Gatlin, former graduate student; Allen Wysocki, associate dean and professor; Karl Kepner, emeritus professor; Derek Farnsworth, assistant professor; and Jennifer L. Clark, senior lecturer, Food and Resource Economics Department; UF/IFAS Extension, Gainesville, FL 32611.

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 difference.
- 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 Wertheim (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.

Conclusions

Managers and associates continually face conflict in the workplace. Knowing how and when to use the five conflict resolution styles makes resolving differences easier. When applying any style, make sure to establish consistent rules. Consider what each party desires and try find opportunities in the conflict (Forbes 2012).

References

- Bell, A. 2002. *Six ways to resolve workplace conflicts*. San Francisco, CA: University of San Francisco.
- Myatt, M. 2012. Five keys of dealing with workplace conflict. *Forbes*. <http://www.forbes.com/sites/mikemyatt/2012/02/22/5-keys-to-dealing-with-workplace-conflict/>
- Robin, D. 2002. *When to engage, when not to engage*. A Daniel Robin and Associates website. <http://www.abetterworkplace.com>
- Wertheim, E. (2002). *Negotiations and resolving conflicts: An overview*. A Northeastern University website. <http://www.damore-mckim.northeastern.edu/faculty/w/wertheim-edward/>