SUCCESSFULLY MANAGING CONFLICT

Dan Krueger
August 21, 2018
OUR TIME TOGETHER TODAY

• Finding your conflict management style
• Learning about the styles & how they interact
• Our initial conflict reactions
• First steps toward resolution
5 MAJOR CONFLICT MANAGEMENT STYLES

• Competing (Dominating, Controlling, Forcing)
• Accommodating
• Avoiding (Withdrawing)
• Compromising
• Collaborating
Conflict Management Styles

- Competing
- Collaborating
- Compromising
- Avoiding
- Accommodating

Assertiveness vs. Unassertiveness

Uncooperative vs. Cooperative
Competing (aka Dominating)

Act directly to meet own needs with little regard for others

- Pro: useful for quick, low-impact decisions; emergencies/safety; or critical decisions where outcome cannot vary
- Con: can cause resentment and hurt relationships

How to Manage:

- Watch for winning for winning’s sake
- Defend the opposite position
- Focus on task commitment; be specific about withdrawal
Accommodating

*Give in and always yield to others’ needs as more important*

- **Pro:** Others may be (temporarily) happy; useful for non-important issues or when faced with better solutions
- **Con:** Others are not aware of your concerns; unsatisfying to never meet your own needs

**How To Manage:**
- Emphasize the relationships (‘The team really needs your opinion here’)
- Remove the relationships (‘If you were the only one affected and you had to decide for yourself...’)
- Gestures of kindness go a long way
Avoiding (aka Withdrawing)

Avoids bringing up differences or denies that a conflict exists

• Pro: Can buy time in emotionally charged space
• Con: Limited communication allows issues to fester unresolved

How To Manage:

• Directly lay out the competing interests/sides
• Don’t avoid the issues & people in conflict
• Two-step ask: you want (opinion), and you want them to think it over and you’ll come back
Compromising

*Trade off possible solutions through negotiation with other(s)*

- **Pro:** Everyone gets something that they want; useful for complex issues
- **Con:** Everyone bears something they don’t want; no one is completely satisfied; often worse outcomes

**How to Manage:**

- **Ask why** they’re willing to give up this, but not that
  - **Find the non-negotiables**
- **Think/speak in terms of fairness; be willing to back off your initial approach**
Collaborating

Asserts own needs/interests and respect those of the other

- **Pro:** Everyone works together for mutual win; relationships are maximized and issues solved
- **Con:** Takes a lot of time and work

**How to Manage:**

- Remind that not all goals will be met or all feelings preserved
- Enforce time limits on decision-making
A FEW THOUGHTS ABOUT STYLES

• We change – based on context and over time
• All styles are useful
• We interpret individuals’ behavior differently
• Flex your style!
  • Think about situations in which conflict did not go as you would have liked – can you now see a better approach?
WHAT STYLE COULD WORK HERE?

Two of your direct reports start arguing loudly in the hallway of your work area. You can’t quite hear what they’re yelling at each other about, but they show no signs of quieting down. You’ve got an important phone call in six minutes, but you recognize that this is a problem that won’t solve itself.
WHAT STYLE COULD WORK HERE?

You’re working on developing your budget for next fiscal year, and you have to work with your counterpart Alex to complete it. You both feel like you’re in competition for scarce dollars within your division. You know Alex’s priority this year is professional development money for his team. You’re most concerned about making sure you have funds to upgrade some equipment that’s long past its useful life. When you meet with Alex, he just keeps hammering about professional development.
REMEMBER SOME THINGS ABOUT THE OTHER PERSON

• Most conflicts are not a result of any intention to do harm
• She thinks her ideas/positions are reasonable
• He wants to feel respected at work
LEARN SOME THINGS ABOUT YOURSELF

• In conflict, our basic reaction is to assign blame
  • Usually to the other (hostility, avoiding, attacking)
  • Sometimes to ourselves (low self-esteem, giving up)

• Assigning blame makes our brains search for data to confirm (that the other guy’s a jerk, she’s lazy, etc.)
Conflict Resolution

• First step in resolving any conflict is awareness of your reactions

• Physiologically, when we feel threatened:
  • Heart rate increases
  • Cortisol & adrenaline flooding
  • Narrowed visual field (and possibly reduced auditory processing)

• Leads to blame-based thinking

• Anna Maravelas: ‘anger makes you stupid’
Conflict Resolution

You’re on your way to an important work meeting. At one red light, the driver in front of you starts focusing on her own backseat. When the light changes to green, she doesn’t even notice! You honk the horn but she ignores you. You can’t believe your eyes as she climbs out of her car and starts digging around in the backseat!

You try to get around her, but a delivery truck is blocking the other lane. You roll down your window to try to get her attention and yell at her to get moving. She ignores you completely.

One minute later, she returns to the front seat and drives away.
Reflexive Thinking

• She’s an idiot! Too stupid and selfish to see the light change!
• These *!#% millennials, they can’t be without their phones for four seconds.
• She probably got her driver’s license in Illinois!
• She’s lazy and unemployed, and doesn’t know what it’s like to have to get to work!

Reflexive responses focus on people, who are unlikely/unwilling to change, instead of on the problem
Moving to Reflective Thinking

• Getting beyond the self-defeating desire to assign blame
  • Shifting from ‘who’ to ‘why’

• Using your cerebral cortex instead of your lizard brain

• Assuming there is a legitimate motive to people’s behavior

Why would a reasonable person do this?
Reflective Thinking

• She’s transporting a cake in the backseat for her sister’s wedding today, and the box started shifting around

• She’s having an asthma attack

• She flicked a cigarette butt out the window, but it flew back in and the seat is on fire

• She has a baby in the backseat and he started choking

Moving from reflexive to reflective thinking opens a dialogue, in which you’re prepared to ask questions & listen
How to Get to Reflective Thinking

1. Use aggressive behavior as a signal – which do you use?
   • Blame can be avoiding also (gossip, not giving opinion in a meeting, undermining, exclusion)

2. Recognize the feeling of flooding; the signs you’re losing control
   • Sweating, tightness in chest, short breath, muttering

3. Call reflexive thinking as you see it – ask yourself, “What am I saying to myself right now? Is it helpful?“

4. Recognize that you have a choice

5. Look for the baby in the backseat
What if Someone Else is Flooded?

EASE

• Empathize (acknowledge their side)
• Appreciate (their commitment, effort, expertise)
• Search for solutions (accounting for hidden realities)
• Explore (what actions might the person take to open dialogue or problem-solve?)
EASE

Your employee Sam is fed up with her colleague Tom. They’ve been working together on a grant proposal, and Sam comes stomping into your office to complain that Tom has been late three times with providing her the data she needs to do her part.

She’s raising her voice, and keeps calling Tom a spacecase and stating that he doesn’t care about this funding, and she can’t possibly be held accountable for the outcome when all his work is late garbage.
EASE

• **Empathize**: ‘I’m hearing that you’re frustrated, Sam. I’d also be worried about the success of a project if I felt like my coworker wasn’t holding up their end of the bargain.’

• **Appreciate**: ‘I know that you’re concerned about the success of this grant because you take your work seriously and want to do well.’

• **Search for solutions**: ‘Maybe there’s a reason that Tom has had trouble meeting your deadlines. He’s committed to his work too, in my experience with him. Can you think of anything that might be getting in his way?’

• **Explore**: ‘Why don’t you set up a time for all of us to sit down and talk about this? Friday morning is great for me.’
Reflective Thinking Can Open a Dialogue

1. Affirm relationship and ability to solve the problem together
   • I want to talk to you because this is affecting our ability to help students...
   • I think this has been getting in the way of our work, and I’d like us to solve that.

2. State facts as you’ve seen them
   • Facts vs. interpretations
   • Emily walking down the hall and doesn’t say hello

3. Ask for help in understanding their behavior
   • Can you help me understand why...
4. Restate their responses!
   • What I’m hearing you say is... You made that decision because...

5. Ask for you want in a positive and specific way
   • What I’d like to see is... What I need from you is...

6. Tell what you’re willing to do, and seek commitment (can be consequence)
   • I will...
   • Next time, we agree that we’ll make sure...
If (When) It Goes Wrong…

Adapted from ‘Taking the Stress Out of Stressful Conversations’ by Holly Weeks, HBR July-August 2001

• Disarm by restating your intentions
  • “I can see how you took it that way. That’s not what I meant. Let’s go over this again.”
  • Moves from contention to agreement

• Fight tactics, not people
  • ‘Thwarting tactics’ – shouting, swearing, shutting down altogether
  • Name the tactic – “I’m not sure how to react to your silence.” “I don’t know how we can talk about this now when you’re shouting so loudly”
  • Behavior =/= character