

Managing Conflict

by: Peggy Grall

One of my favorite books is titled, *We'd have a Great Relationship - If It Weren't For You*, by Bruce Derman and Michael Hauge. It's a humorous and insightful look at how, so often in relationships, we want to blame and criticize the other person for how the relationship is going wrong. How often have you felt the same way about the workplace? "If it just wasn't for her," or "his bad attitude," or "that little group" - this place would be great! It's a common first response to conflict between employees, between management and staff, and between customers and suppliers.

So, what can we do about conflict? Let's start with a basic understanding of the nature of conflict. So often, people view the presence of any type of conflict as a sign of a low-quality workforce, ineffective management, or poor work environment. The truth is that conflict is a natural, normal part of business and personal life. We also know that the degree of conflict will escalate in direct proportion to the presence of four factors: perceived scarce resources, limited opportunities, need for power, and desire for control.

Often, anger accompanies a conflict situation. Having an anger reaction to another person or situation can act as a signal that something needs to change. Many people feel that anger is always a negative emotion. They may have a hard time controlling their own anger or keeping their cool when those around them get upset. When people are wary of anger, it can lead them to either "fight" or "flee" the situation prematurely. It's common for people to take one of two positions when they encounter anger and conflict: either they charge in and try to "fix" it - now; or they try to ignore it, hoping it will get better on its own.

The key to handling conflict situations effectively is to learn to choose an appropriate response to each situation. People are flexible, and we can choose from a range of responses in handling volatile situations effectively. Kenneth Thomas, in his significant work, *Conflict and Conflict Management*, describes five separate ways people can respond when faced with an interpersonal conflict:

1. Competing: Domination

Satisfying one's needs at the expense of others.

2. Collaborating: Integration

Satisfying both parties' concerns in a dispute.

3. Avoiding: Neglect

Ignoring or distracting people away from an issue.

4. Accommodating: Appeasement

Pleases others at the cost of their own needs.

5. Compromising: Sharing

Giving up something to get something.

Each of these reaction styles have their merit. So, when is it best to choose one over the other? Let's take a brief look at when each style might be appropriate.

1. Competing: Domination

This style is effective when:

- A necessary decision is unpopular
- The matter is crucial
- There is no need or room for other's ideas or opinions

An example of this may be when the senior management of an organization must make tough financial and staffing decisions and the employees' input can't be considered.

2. Collaborating: Integration

This style is effective when:

- You need differing views and/or joint ownership in a situation
- Both parties have a point or need that is important
- Overcoming previous hostility in the relationship

Collaborating can be helpful when a team is working on a project and it's vital for the success of the project to have the talents of, and input and buy-in from, all the team members.

3. Avoiding: Neglect

This style is effective when:

- The controversy is trivial
- Victory is impossible
- One or both of the parties need to calm down to effectively deal with the situation

Avoidance works well when a conflict is brewing and what's being talked about isn't valid, is incorrect or malicious - such as in the case of someone spreading rumors.

4. Accommodating: Appeasement

This style is effective when:

- The issue is significantly more important to one person than to the other
- You wish to mend fences
- Peace is more important than a win

When a matter isn't critical and taking someone's ideas or direction will strengthen the ongoing working relationship, accommodating is in order.

5. Compromising: Sharing

This style is effective when:

- Opponents of equal power/ influence are locked in a no-win situation
- Seeking a quick, temporary fix of a complicated issue
- Under the pressure of deadline

Remember that compromising, while it will get past the immediate conflict situation, hasn't fully resolved the issue nor drawn upon all the resources of the parties involved.

Conflict in working relationships can signal the need for change and innovation. Addressing a conflict situation effectively will unleash creativity and foster new working alliances. Choose well your response!

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