

## MANAGING CONFLICT

### What's Your Conflict Resolution Style?

It is inevitable that you will be called upon to resolve interpersonal conflicts. Interpersonal conflict involves two or more individuals who perceive themselves in opposition to each other regarding preferred outcomes.

We respond to interpersonal conflict in at least five different ways: avoiding, accommodating, compromising, forcing and collaborating. What's your style?

### Five Conflict Resolution Styles—Pros and Cons

1. *The avoidance style* involves behavior that is unassertive and uncooperative. We use this style to stay out of conflicts, ignore disagreements or remain neutral. This approach is a decision to let the conflict work itself out, by itself. It is a subconscious aversion to tension and frustration. This is a passive style that, if used excessively, results in unfavorable reactions from others. Nevertheless, it can be useful if a conscious decision is made to use it and it is appropriate for the situation. An example of an appropriate use of avoidance is: Two subordinates have to vent frustration and talk through a problem that does not concern you or the company. Don't get involved, just listen.

2. *The forcing style* is assertive but uncooperative. It reflects a "win-lose" approach in that only one person or group wins. We use this when we have no concern for others and our desire to achieve our own goals is our primary concern. This approach involves elements of abused power and dominance. Forcing is not useful in long-term relationships—others will have unfavorable evaluations of you.
3. *The accommodating style* represents behavior that is cooperative but not assertive. This approach may be useful in a long-term action plan to encourage cooperation. It is a passive act. Its negative consequence? Being perceived as weak. It's useful if the group or individual you work with has much power (i.e. boss) and abuses their power and you.
4. *The compromising style* represents behavior that is between cooperative and assertive. It's a give and take process, and can involve negotiation and a series of concessions. Those who use it tend to be evaluated favorably. This style is commonly accepted by many. However, when compared to the collaborative style, it does not maximize joint outcomes.
5. *The collaborative style* is behavior that is strongly cooperative and assertive. It reflects a "win-win" approach. Both parties win. This style represents a desire to maximize joint outcomes. People who use this style see conflict as a natural process that leads to helpful, creative solutions. They see that a conflict resolution that satisfies all leads to commitment to the solution. They see others as equals having legitimate opinions. Others evaluate this style and the user favorably. A team approach in your management style accommodates this conflict solution style most of the time.

Each of us tends to utilize a particular style more frequently than others. The choice usually reflects a personality characteristic. Of course there are other factors that influence the choice such as attitude and the power of others, and the demands of the present situation.

What is your attitude toward conflict? Is it a positive or negative force in your organization? If you've answered negatively then you need to re-examine the process, purpose and end results of conflict. It can be a powerful force that aids problem-solving and decision-making. Conflict occurs when two or more parties are in opposition over their preferred outcomes. This actually describes a problem situation, doesn't it? There are many problems in groups, between individuals and departments. The benefits of conflict are many.

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### Six Benefits of Conflict

1. Conflict is a signal that a problem exists.
2. Through the constructive process of resolving conflict, we see trouble situations we weren't aware of.
3. We search for the means to change a problem.
4. The process of searching for ways to resolve conflict may lead to innovation and change.
5. Conflict may make necessary change more acceptable as well as point out the need for change.
6. Better decision-making and problem-solving occurs under conflict. Historians point to the governmental policy group that made Kennedy's Bay of Pigs Cuban crisis decision a prime example of making a decision without conflict. The policy group was very cohesive and desired agreement on a decision. They did not consider enough alternative solutions the entire set of pros and cons before making their infamous decision. They didn't have conflict. No one wanted or could offer opposition to their decision because everyone agreed from the beginning. Decision-making is aided by conflict because more alternatives are generated and more complete evaluations are made of the problem situations.

However, conflict can also be a negative force if it's never resolved. A leader's attitude toward conflict determines whether it occurs openly and whether it's a positive force that invokes problem-solving behavior.

USING GREAT FEEDBACK STRATEGIES  
FOR  
INFLUENCING OTHERS

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## Criteria for Constructive Feedback

1. DESCRIBE vs. interpret the behavior

*JUST DESCRIBE*

2. Provide SPECIFIC vs. general observations of behavior

*Be AS SPECIFIC AS POSSIBLE*

3. The feedback is **SOLICITED** vs. imposed

4. IMMEDIATE vs. delayed timing

5. Addresses MODIFIABLE BEHAVIOR vs. unmodifiable.

## Guidelines for Constructive Feedback

### 1. Acknowledge the need for feedback

The first thing to recognize is the value of giving feedback, both positive and negative. Feedback is vital to any organization committed to improving itself, for it is the only way to know what needs to be improved. Giving and receiving feedback should be part of the whole organization's culture.

*The group with whom you work should agree that giving and receiving feedback is an acceptable part of how you will improve the way you work together. This agreement is necessary so that no one is surprised when he or she received feedback.*

### 2. Give both positive and negative feedback

Many people take good work for granted and give feedback only when there are problems. This is a bad policy: people will more likely pay attention to your complaints if they have also received your compliments. It is important to remember to tell people when they have done something well.

### 3. Understand the context

The most important characteristic of feedback is that it always has a context: where it happened, why it happened, and what led up to the event. You never simply walk up to a person, deliver a feedback statement, and then leave. Before you give feedback, review the actions and decisions that led up to the moment.

#### 4. Know when to give feedback

Before giving feedback, determine whether the moment is right. You must consider more than your own need to give feedback.

Constructive feedback happens only within a context of listening to and caring about the person.

Do not give feedback when:

- ☐ You don't know much about the circumstances of the behavior.
- ☐ You don't care about the person or will not be around long enough to follow up on the aftermath of your feedback. Hit-and-run feedback is not fair.
- ☐ The feedback, positive or negative, is about something the person has no power to change.
- ☐ The other person seems low in self-esteem.
- ☐ Your purpose is not really improvement, but to put someone on the spot ("gotcha!") or to demonstrate how smart or how much more responsible you are.
- ☐ The time, place, or circumstances are inappropriate (for example, in the presence of others).

#### 5. Know how to give feedback

##### Be descriptive.

Relate, as objectively as possible, what you saw the other person do or what you heard the other person say. Give specific examples, the more recent the better. Examples from the distant past are more likely to lead to disagreement over the "facts."

##### Don't use labels.

Be clear, specific, and unambiguous. Words like "immature," "unprofessional," "irresponsible," and "prejudiced" are labels we attach to sets of behavior. Describe the behavior and drop the labels. For example, say, "You missed the deadline we had all agreed to meet" rather than "You're being irresponsible, and I want to know what you're going to do about it!"

Don't exaggerate.

Be exact: To say "You're always late for deadlines" is probably untrue, and, therefore, unfair. It invites the receiver of the feedback to argue with the exaggeration rather than to focus on and respond to the real issue.

Don't be judgmental.

At least, don't use the rhetoric of judgement. Words like "good," "better," "bad," "worst," and "should" place you in the role of a controlling parent. This invites the person receiving your comments to respond as a child. When that happens, and it will most of the time, the possibility of constructive feedback is lost.

Speak for yourself.

Don't refer to absent, anonymous people. Avoid such references as "A lot of people here don't like it when you..." Don't allow yourself to be a conduit for other peoples' complaints. Instead, encourage others to speak for themselves.

Talk first about yourself, not about the other person.

Use a statement with the word "I" as the subject, not the word "you." This guideline is one of the most important and one of the most surprising.

Consider the following examples regarding lateness:

1. "You are frequently late for meetings."
2. "You are very prompt for meetings."
3. "I feel annoyed when you are late for meetings."
4. "I appreciate your coming to meetings on time."

Statements 1 and 2 are "you" statements. People become defensive around "you" statements and are less likely to hear what you say when it is phrased this way. Statements 3 and 4 are "I" messages and create an adult/peer relationship. People are more likely to remain open to your message when an "I" statement is used. Even if



your rank is higher than the feedback recipient, strive for an adult/peer relationship. Use "I" statements so the effectiveness of your comments is not lost.

Phrase the issue as a statement, not a question.

Contrast     *"When are you going to stop being late for meetings?"*  
with         *"I get annoyed when you are late for meetings."*

The question is controlling and manipulative because it implies:

*"You, the responder, are expected to adjust your behavior to accommodate me, the questioner."*

Most people become defensive and angry when spoken to this way. On the other hand, the "I" statement implies "I think we have an issue we must resolve together." The "I" statement allows the receiver to see what effect the behavior had on you.

Restrict your feedback to things you know for certain.

Don't present your opinions as facts. Speak only of what you see and hear and what you feel and want.

Help people hear and accept your compliments when giving positive feedback.

Many people feel awkward when told good things about themselves and will fend off the compliment ("Oh, it wasn't that big a deal. Others worked on it as much as I did."). Sometimes they will change the subject. It may be important to reinforce the positive feedback and help the person hear it, acknowledge it, and accept.

## Guidelines for Receiving Feedback

### 1. Understand What Was Said

Remain silent. Actively listen. Look for nonverbal as well as verbal feedback. Ask for clarification or amplification, if desired, when the sender is finished.

*"Could you tell me a little more about your reaction to that?"*

Paraphrase your understanding of the sender's feedback.

*"In other words, you thought I wasn't interested in the group discussion because I didn't volunteer my thoughts?"*

### 2. Be Open Rather than Defensive

Approach feedback with an "I want to learn about myself" attitude. Feedback represents the other person's experience. It is neither right nor wrong.

Avoid explaining your behavior. Don't give causes, reasons, or excuses.

Try to see the feedback from the other person's point of view.

### 3. Separate Yourself from Your Behavior

Try to maintain a sense of your personal worth and view the feedback as a description of your behavior as it affects another person. As a person, you are OK. If your behavior creates a problem for others, you can choose whether or not to change the behavior.

### 4. Check the "Fit"

Try to obtain the feedback on the same behavior from several people. Then check to see if it "fits." Does it make sense; does it agree with what you know about yourself, does it agree with what others have said; is it practical; etc.?

5. Handling feedback from someone who doesn't know how to give it  
There may be a time when you receive feedback from someone who does not know feedback guidelines. In these cases, help your critic refashion the criticism so that it conforms to the rules for constructive feedback ("What did I say or do to dissatisfy you?").

When reacting to feedback:

**Breathe.**

This is simple but effective advice. Our bodies are conditioned to react to stressful situations as though they were physical assaults. Our muscles tense. We start breathing rapidly and shallowly. Taking full, deep breaths forces your body to relax and allows your brain to maintain greater alertness.

**Listen carefully.**

Don't interrupt. Don't discourage the feedback-giver.

**Ask questions for clarity.**

You have a right to receive clear feedback. Ask for specific examples ("Can you describe what I do or say that makes me appear aggressive to you?").

**Acknowledge valid feedback.**

Paraphrase the message in your own words to let the person know you have heard and understood what was said.

Acknowledge valid points.

Agree with what is true. Agree with what is possible. Acknowledge the other person's point of view ("I understand how you might get that impression.") and try to understand their reaction.

Agreeing with what's true or possible does not mean you agree to change your behavior. You can agree, for instance, that sometimes you jump too quickly to a conclusion without implying that you will slow down on your conclusion-making procession. Agreeing with what's true or possible also does not mean agreeing with any value judgement about you. You can agree that your reports have been late without agreeing that you are irresponsible.

## D\*E\*S\*C

### An Effective Technique for Handling Negative Feedback

1. DESCRIBE the situation, remembering to be specific and objective.  
Focus on the present--not the past--behaviors and only give the amount of information the recipient can use, rather than what you feel you have to give.
2. EXPRESS your own feelings.  
How is the other person's behavior affecting you?  
Remember two points to prevent an emotional battle:
  - \* Take responsibility for your own emotion.
  - \* Don't use feedback as a means to vent your emotional energy.  
Feedback will be dysfunctional if you use it as catharsis.
3. SPECIFY the changes you want.  
Try to be specific, though not demanding.  
It's not enough to say what you don't like: What would you have like to have occur?
4. Communicate what you perceive as the CONSEQUENCES, or possible outcomes, of the changes that you request.  
What would be the positive consequences if your request is granted?  
Try to stay positive; not: "you'd better.....or else."