

# Conflict - is it always a bad thing?

For most of us, dealing with conflict demands a lot of energy, creates stress and makes for a generally unpleasant experience. Some people are naturally good at managing conflict to meet the goal of resolution. This could be through practice or fine-tuned emotional intelligence. Others struggle to communicate under pressure and are often misunderstood. This begs the question, is conflict always a bad thing?

Our perception that conflict is always negative and unpleasant can lead us to avoid issues, delay discussions and allow problems to fester in the background. The reality is that conflict exists everywhere in the world, from the playground to the boardroom and even between entire nations. Avoidance is futile.

We commonly believe that conflict can only have a negative outcome. In past experience, we may have found that conflict has led to negative feelings, reduced communication and teamwork, bullying and increased negative stereotyping. This can explain why some of us prefer to avoid conflict rather than address the issue at hand.

Conflict can be described in simple terms as a state of disagreement between

two or more parties. Interestingly, disagreement is full of opportunity. It is true that you can't learn anything while you are speaking. It is also true that conflict need not result in negative consequences. Diversity of opinion allows for full consideration of every angle of a situation and can lead to growth, opportunity and often, a better outcome.

Some of the positive payoffs of airing differences of opinion are:

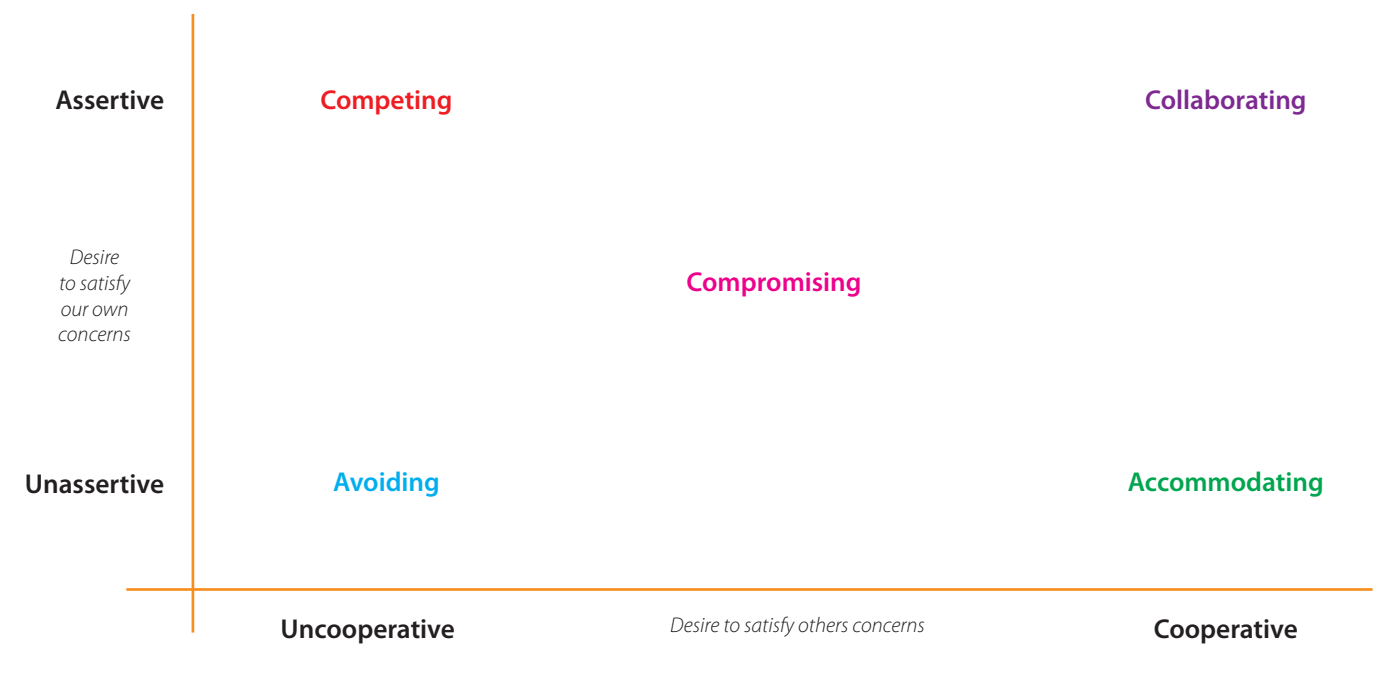
- Release of frustration
- Formation of new perspectives on both sides
- More informed decision making
- Increased cohesion resulting from productive discussion
- Innovative change
- Appreciation of diversity

So, how do we guide situations of conflict to positive resolution – the “win-win”?

Reaction to conflict has been modelled by Kenneth Thomas and Ralph Kilmann. They identified five different styles of conflict management:

- Competing
- Collaborating
- Compromising
- Avoiding
- Accommodating

This research showed that everyone has one dominant style. This does not mean that we are unable to adopt other styles. It simply means that each of us has a preferred style dependent on our comfort level, our desire to satisfy our concerns and our desire to satisfy the concerns of others. These styles can be plotted on a graph to look like this:



It is important to note that no style is more critical than any other. All styles have a role depending on the circumstance. For instance, a competing style may be important when a quick decision is needed, such as in the case of an emergency. An avoidance style may be useful when the issue is trivial and more important issues are pressing, or to give people time to cool down and regain perspective. A compromising style may be constructive when quick solutions are required under the pressure of time or to earn credits for later negotiations. An accommodating style may be appropriate when issues are more important to others than they are to you or to allow people to learn and grow from their own experiences. Finally, a collaborative approach is effective when your objective is to learn or if you want to gain commitment from all parties.

The key is in identifying which is your dominant style, and understanding if it is working for you overall.

In many business situations, a collaborative style is valued for a number of reasons. Through collaboration, all parties can learn from working through disagreements and recognising alternate perspectives. Collaboration allows individuals to build a positive history with colleagues and peers through mutual achievement. Collaboration also encourages ownership by all parties, leading to increased accountability

and empowerment.

We can all take steps to practice a more collaborative style.

### 1. Listen

Aim to understand the viewpoint of others. Resist the urge to interrupt. If you feel like making a point, ask a question instead. Paraphrase to ensure you understand the message they are sending.

### 2. Adopt a "can do" approach

If the answer to a question is no, find the yes. Some things can't be done. Focus more on what can be done.

### 3. Be honest

It's harder than it seems. We worry about upsetting others, as well as the possible repercussions of doing so. Think of the worst case scenario of stating an unwelcome fact. Will the person never speak to you again? Will you lose your job? Both outcomes are highly unlikely. The actual outcome will be based on the delivery of the message and the purpose behind it, rather than the message itself. Phrase your honesty in a constructive "can do" manner, ensuring the other party knows exactly how to work with the information you have provided.

### 4. Focus on the goal, not the person

Focus on the outcome you want, not on the person disagreeing with you. It is unlikely that they are in conflict with you for the thrill of the disagreement. They

probably dislike it as much as you do. Focus on the bigger picture. The broader your perspective, the more likely you are to find common ground.

### 5. Understand what is within your power

Recognise when you need to refer up the chain of command, or when the discussion could benefit from a new point of view. If the aim is collaborative resolution and you are in a deadlock, other people can offer new perspectives.

Disagreement can offer the opportunity to learn, grow and reach new heights. Developing an awareness of your preferred style of managing conflict, and recognising the best style for the situation at hand can help you professionally manage conflict situations with intelligence and composure, leading to a win-win outcome for everyone involved. 💡

© Successful Minds – August 2009



e: [info@successfulminds.com.au](mailto:info@successfulminds.com.au)  
w: [www.successfulminds.com.au](http://www.successfulminds.com.au)