

Manager Know Thyself

Learning Objectives

- Identify and describe the five most common reactions to conflict, known as *conflict styles*.
- Identify and describe the costs and benefits of each of the five conflict styles.
- Demonstrate understanding of your own habits when responding to conflict, along with the pros and cons of your habitual responses to conflict.
- Identify and understand the approaches to conflict used most often by your coworkers and superiors in order to tailor your responses accordingly.
- Demonstrate the process of altering your habitual responses to conflict as needed to increase the likelihood of productive conflict resolution.
- Identify those situations that call for active listening and those that do not.
- Demonstrate changes in improved listening skills.

RESPONDING TO CONFLICT AT THE BUREAU OF RECLAMATION

John Smith is not happy with his administrative assistant, Maria. On the days when John needs her most, she calls in “sick.” Today John is scheduled to begin holding the one-one-one meetings required for staff performance reviews. John is supposed to meet with each of his twenty employees to share his ratings of their performance over the past year. Any deficiencies in performance must be discussed and, unfortunately, there are plenty of deficiencies to discuss. Although John has not administered performance reviews at this agency before, he has heard that it is

typically a painful process with lots of hurt feelings and even occasional resignations. Because Maria is not here, John will have to find all the files himself, answer calls during the meetings with staff members, and try to keep on schedule without the benefit of his assistant who should strategically buzz him to let him know when his next appointment has arrived. Maria left a message on John's answering machine saying that she feels that helping him manage the review process is "above her pay grade." She said that she is happy to work on other tasks but won't participate in the review management process. John is wondering what he should do about this problem and then it hits him: he will send out an e-mail to all of his staff, including Maria, to tell them that the performance reviews are being postponed until Maria is feeling better. That will buy him at least another day or two so he can get some work done before having to get sidetracked with the drama that will likely result from the performance reviews and from dealing with Maria. He hopes she will take the hint and "get over herself."

Once John understands the five common approaches to conflict, he will be better able to predict and respond effectively to this type of situation.

RESPONDING TO CONFLICT: FIVE COMMON APPROACHES

Conflict is neither inherently positive nor negative. Instead, it is our reaction to conflict that determines whether it is constructive or destructive. Conflict presents an opportunity for positive change, deepening relationships, and problem solving. How you treat the other party or parties in conflict is highly predictive of the strength and duration of the relationship in the future. As Mary Parker Follett (1942) wrote nearly one hundred years ago, "All polishing is done through friction." Tjosvold's work (2008) shows us that organizations that encourage constructive debate and the open expression of disagreement among team members can greatly improve their effectiveness, creativity, and efficiency. Nevertheless, when most people use the term *conflict* there is an implied negative connotation. Is your reaction to conflict generally constructive or destructive? How do you feel after you address a problem with employees, your boss, or your clients? That postconflict feeling can tell us a lot. Does conflict make you want to fight or take flight?

Before reading further, please read and complete the conflict style assessment in Figure 1.1. Please select the answer that best corresponds to your preferred methods for addressing conflict in the two situations.

The **conflict styles inventory (CSI)** is a questionnaire that is used to assess an individual's habits in response to conflict. As the CSI indicates, there are five primary responses to conflict: avoidance, accommodation, collaboration, compromising, and competing. Each of these responses is appropriate in some circumstances and inappropriate or ineffective in others. You might have assumed that the **collaborative style** is the best of the five conflict styles because this is a book on the subject of collaboration. Surprisingly, that is not the case at all. Instead of pushing you toward the use of one of these conflict styles over the others, this book will argue that competent conflict managers are adept at analyzing problems and consciously choosing the style that is most likely to produce the desired results. Sometimes accommodation is called for, whereas other situations call for compromise, and so on. Each conflict presents an opportunity for the parties to consciously articulate their goals in the interaction and choose the best conflict style response to achieve those goals. Sometimes preserving or enhancing the relationship is the ultimate goal and in other cases your goal may be to avoid a no-win situation or make a quick and fair decision. Matching the conflict style to the particular dispute or decision-making opportunity is an important skill at work and in our civic and personal lives.

Most people will notice higher scores in one or two categories and significantly lower scores in other categories. This reflects a tendency for one to react with one predominant response to conflict, regardless of the type of problem at hand. For example, one may be conflict avoidant even when the problem would be more effectively resolved through direct action. The next section will help you understand each of the possible responses to conflict and when to employ each one most effectively.

It can be problematic that most of us predominately use only one or two of these conflict styles when we unconsciously respond to problems as opposed to analyzing situations and choosing the style that best matches the problem at hand. The best conflict management works something like good health care. When health problems are avoidable they should be avoided through preventive measures, such as good eating habits. When problems arise in spite of our preventative efforts, they must be diagnosed and then treated based on that diagnosis. So it should be for conflict. However, even the most stressful

Figure 1.1 Conflict Styles Inventory

Styles

Think of two different contexts (A and B) in which you have conflict, disagreement, argument, or disappointment with someone. An example might be a work associate or someone you live with. Then, according to the following scale, fill in your scores for situation A and situation B. *For each question you will have two scores.* For example, on question one the scoring might look like this 1. 2/4.

Write the name of each person for the two contexts here:

Person A _____ Person B _____

1 = Never 2 = Seldom 3 = Sometimes 4 = Often 5 = Always

Person A/ Person B

1. ___/___ I avoid being put on the spot; I keep conflicts to myself.
2. ___/___ I use my influence to get my ideas accepted.
3. ___/___ I usually try to split the difference in order to resolve an issue.
4. ___/___ I generally try to satisfy the other's needs.
5. ___/___ I try to investigate an issue to find a solution acceptable to us.
6. ___/___ I usually avoid open discussion of my differences with the other.
7. ___/___ I use my authority to make decisions in my favor.
8. ___/___ I try to find a middle course to resolve an impasse.
9. ___/___ I usually accommodate the other's wishes.
10. ___/___ I try to integrate my ideas with the other's to come up with a decision jointly.
11. ___/___ I try to stay away from disagreement with the other.
12. ___/___ I use my expertise to make a decision that favors me.
13. ___/___ I propose a middle ground for breaking deadlocks.
14. ___/___ I give in to the other's wishes.
15. ___/___ I try to work with the other to try to find solutions that satisfy both our expectations.
16. ___/___ I try to keep my disagreement to myself in order to avoid hard feelings.
17. ___/___ I generally pursue my side of an issue.
18. ___/___ I negotiate with the other to reach a compromise.
19. ___/___ I often go with the other's suggestions.
20. ___/___ I exchange accurate information with the other so we can solve a problem together.
21. ___/___ I try to avoid unpleasant exchanges with the other.

Figure 1.1
(continued)

- 22. ___/___ I sometimes use my power to win.
- 23. ___/___ I use-give-and-take so that a compromise can be made.
- 24. ___/___ I try to satisfy the other's expectations.
- 25. ___/___ I try to bring all our concerns out in the open so that the issues can be resolved.

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conflict provides you with an opportunity to showcase your conflict management skills and communicate the importance you place on treating others fairly and respectfully, even when you disagree about the outcome of a dispute.

THE FIVE CONFLICT STYLES

There are five predominant styles for dealing with conflict (see Figure 1.2). Most of us habitually use only one or two of these styles. Your choice of preferred styles likely depends on the culture in which you were raised and the way your family of origin dealt with conflict. Knowing your own style tendencies will help you improve your own response to conflict and also deepen your understanding of those around you—especially if their preferred style is different from yours. Rather than vilifying those who seem to fight every fight or those who behave with passive aggression, you will come to understand why people exhibit different habitual responses to conflict and how to work successfully with others who may not share your preferred conflict style.

Conflict Avoidant Style

It does not take an expert in conflict theory to realize the **avoidant style** is the approach to conflict being employed by John and Maria in the scenario at the beginning of this chapter. Clearly, John is avoiding dealing with performance reviews and he previously avoided addressing the absenteeism problem with Maria. He has rationalized his avoidance with the thought that he has not been on the job very long and maybe Maria's performance over the long term will improve. Avoidance becomes the preferred conflict management style for individuals who

Figure 1.2
Scoring the Conflict Styles Inventory

Scoring: Put your total for each question and each person on the lines and then add together on the blank lines at the end.

A/B	A/B	A/B	A/B	A/B
1. ___/___	2. ___/___	3. ___/___	4. ___/___	5. ___/___
6. ___/___	7. ___/___	8. ___/___	9. ___/___	10. ___/___
11. ___/___	12. ___/___	13. ___/___	14. ___/___	15. ___/___
16. ___/___	17. ___/___	18. ___/___	19. ___/___	20. ___/___
21. ___/___	22. ___/___	23. ___/___	24. ___/___	25. ___/___
___/___	___/___	___/___	___/___	___/___
A/B	A/B	A/B	A/B	A/B
Avoidance	Competition	Compromise	Accommodation	Collaboration
totals	totals	totals	totals	totals

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have had highly negative experiences with accommodating or competing styles of conflict management. If avoidance is your preferred approach, then it is likely that you view conflict as a win-lose situation and you believe you are likely to come out on the losing end more often than not. People in low-power positions, those from cultures that prioritize social harmony above all else, and those with lower verbal and social skills are likely to rate high on conflict avoidance.

John is not in a low-power position, so why did he use the avoidance response? In this particular case, he may perceive that his power to influence Maria's behavior is relatively weak. Of course, as any psychologist will tell you, we can only control what we think, do, or say—but we cannot control what others think, do, or say. If Maria wants to use her sick leave, the organization's policies allow her to do so. The fact that she uses it at the worst times doesn't change the policy. However, John does have some tools at his disposal and so far, avoidance hasn't really solved this recurring problem. We will read more about the changes he decides to make in his response to conflict but by the end of the chapter he will realize that avoidance will not achieve the results he desires in this case.

As previously discussed, conflict avoidance is not always a bad or irrational response when faced with a daunting problem. In fact, avoidance is the right

approach in some situations. Specifically, if a problem is small and likely to go away on its own, then avoidance may be called for. When we fight every fight we expend energy that might be better used to address the most important problems. It is important to pick your battles. If you scored low on this style (below three), then you might want to be more judicious at picking your battles so that you can save your energy for problems that are more central to the mission of your work unit or to your career goals. If you scored high on this style (seven or above), then you might want to work on your framing and problem-solving skills (covered in Chapter Four) so that you feel confident in your ability to proactively address problems.

For many problems, avoidance only works temporarily and can often make matters worse in the long run. Conflict avoiders tend to let things go repeatedly until something snaps and they explode—sometimes over a relatively small infraction. I call this *the volcano effect* (see the following for more information on volcanoes at work). Large organizations are better at conflict avoidance than smaller organizations. In large organizations, if one person procrastinates about addressing a problem, then maybe someone else will take charge and deal with the issue. In smaller organizations there are fewer people onto whom we can push our problems. Do not confuse *conflict prevention* with *conflict avoidance*. **Conflict prevention** occurs when an individual or group examines the sources of predictable and recurring problems and then takes reasonable steps to address the root causes of those problems so that they do not occur or recur. Examples of conflict prevention within organizations may include changing overlapping job descriptions so as to have greater role clarity and accountability. However, **conflict avoidance** occurs when an individual or group has evidence that a problem currently exists or will soon exist but no steps are taken to acknowledge and address the problem. Conflict avoiders refuse to acknowledge the problem exists, in the hope it will just go away. This may work for small, nonrecurring problems but is unlikely to work for systemic, recurring, or large problems.

One can see clear connections between some conflict avoidant behaviors and the psychological phenomenon of *denial*. Like avoidance, **denial** occurs when an individual or group refuses to acknowledge a reality that is highly unpleasant. Denial is a protective mechanism that comes into force when reality is so overwhelming that to acknowledge its truth could result in a psychological or physical breakdown, for example, when an organization announces it is downsizing and your unit will be entirely eliminated. Yet you refuse to look for

other work until the doors officially close because you keep hoping some miracle will occur and the decision to close will be reversed. Denial protects the individual from the shock that reality poses to his or her psyche.

If you are conflict avoidant, how did this pattern develop? Perhaps you have had traumatic experiences with conflict in your family or in your work environment. Perhaps you feel a sense of hopelessness or powerlessness to positively affect decisions and to fix problems. Perhaps you have a shy personality and prefer not to engage in the long conversations often needed to solve problems productively. The first step to becoming a more proactive and successful conflict manager is to understand why you tend to want to avoid conflict. The next step is to work on your conflict management skills so you can feel confident in your ability to proactively affect conflicts and solve problems. The third step is to develop a plan and a timeline for improving your ability to proactively address problems as they arise (see the goal-setting section at the end of this chapter).

In the meantime, when you push yourself away from the default style of conflict avoidance you may fear that you are being too confrontational with others or taking on too many problems. This is rarely the case with someone who scored high on avoidance (or, coincidentally, on accommodating, too). As long as you are not acting out of anger when you address problems with other people and you use tactful and constructive language, then you are much more likely to see positive results and be viewed as a problem solver. Note that conflict avoiders are nearly nonexistent in upper level management of successful and dynamic organizations.

Accommodation

The **accommodative style** occurs when individuals have a preferred outcome but are willing to sacrifice their preferences so the other negotiators can realize their own, conflicting preference, thereby ensuring no harm comes to the relationship between the two. Conflict accommodators care deeply about the feelings of others and they seek to maintain harmony in their relationships and their work environment. If you scored high on this style (seven or higher), then you may believe it is frequently necessary to place your own wishes or preferences as secondary to those of others in order to maintain positive relationships. Although this belief is certainly true in some situations, a high score here may indicate that you are, believe it or not, “too nice.” You may seem too indecisive when difficult decisions need to be made at the management level. Your desire to please others and to be liked by them may mean that some people take you for granted or take

advantage of you, with suggestions like “Ask Barbara to work late, she never says no.” Or “Try to get Jose to work that holiday because you have plans. He is such a nice guy.” Although everyone needs to “take one for the team” now and then, accommodating people tend to sacrifice more than their fair share. But why not, because it does not seem to bother them? Yet constant accommodation does bother them; they have learned to keep their opinions and preferences to themselves. Accommodators sometimes experience negative health or psychological effects from holding in their frustration and bottling up their emotions.

Conflict accommodators have difficulty openly sharing their ideas, feedback, and concerns for fear that they may harm the feelings of others. As a result, the team often misses out on the full contribution that these team members could be making. Their ideas do not surface. Accommodators also have difficulty delegating work to subordinates, which is a recipe for disaster in a manager’s career. The ability to delegate reasonable tasks to others using clear direction is crucial for maintaining efficient work flow and for reserving the manager’s time for true management-level decisions.

By contrast, if you scored low on this measure (three or lower) then you may want to consider being a bit more flexible, accommodating, and making concessions to others occasionally so that you are viewed as more of a team player and to show that you care about the needs of others. Those who seldom act in an accommodating manner are typically viewed as pushy, selfish, and not a team player.

When is accommodation the best approach to conflict? When an individual is in a low-power situation, with little hope of achieving the preferred outcome, then accommodation may be the best choice. Also, when an issue is of relatively little importance to you but the other person has a strong preference or need. For example, your colleague wants to reschedule your meeting with him from Tuesday to Wednesday. The change is only a minor inconvenience to you but it allows your colleague to meet an important family obligation. Accommodating others in this fashion allows for a reasonable give-and-take between interdependent team members and builds good will. Next time you need to reschedule a meeting, you hope your colleague will return the favor. However, if you find that you repeatedly accommodate others and it is becoming frustrating to you, then you may not be adequately communicating or asserting your own needs to others. Most accommodators see conflict as a win-lose situation, believing that if they win it might come at the cost of the relationship. Positive movement would include changing the vision of conflict to one in which all persons can win sometimes,

particularly considering their pressing needs and a fair give-and-take among colleagues and friends.

Collaboration

A high score in the collaboration category indicates a preference to work together with others to achieve outcomes that meet the needs of all. Collaboration occurs when two or more individuals work together to share information and make joint decisions. If you scored low on this measure (three or lower), then you may have trouble delegating and sharing decision-making authority with others, even when their buy-in is crucial to the implementation of decisions. If you scored high on the collaborative style (seven or higher), you likely view conflict as an opportunity to solve problems by working positively with others. Some have called this the win-win viewpoint, meaning that for one person to win in a negotiation or conflict the other person's needs must also be met (meaning they must also win). You are not willing to win at the cost of the relationship, but you believe that by putting your heads together, you can generally find mutually acceptable solutions to the problems at hand.

Collaboration is important in work teams. According to a recent study, workplace teams with cooperative approaches to conflict management, as opposed to competitive approaches, exhibited higher levels of trust among team members (Hempel, Zhang, & Tjosvold, 2009). Chan, Huang, and Ng (2008) found that managers with a cooperative style also showed more concern for their employees as people and that this concern fostered more trust. The deeper levels of trust between cooperative managers and their employees led to greater deference to those same managers when difficult decisions had to be made or when the manager intervened to resolve conflict.

So why is this not the best style of conflict management? Not all problems call for collaboration. Imagine the following scenario. At a daylong meeting of one hundred employees you decide to use a collaborative approach to decide whether to order sandwiches, pizza, or fried chicken for lunch. After an hour of unsuccessful consensus seeking you would likely abandon this approach and switch to making an authoritative decision more closely associated with the competitive style. There are times when a quick decision by our leaders is called for and times when it is not. Collaboration takes time. When time is short, leaders must act swiftly and decisively. In other situations, the decision is not important enough to justify bringing together everyone to jointly reach a decision. If you have laid the

groundwork by building strong relationships with others in your organization, then they will typically trust your judgment when decisions must be made quickly or do not warrant the time it takes to engage in collaborative decision making.

The larger the group, the harder it will be to obtain 100 percent consensus on any issue. Imagine trying to get one hundred people to agree on whether to order Chinese or Mexican food for lunch. This would not be a good use of time and may result in more conflict rather than having someone make an executive decision on the matter. Although an open and collaborative discussion of issues is often warranted, sometimes it is necessary to adopt a decision rule that allows for something less than 100 percent consensus, especially in large groups. Requiring 100 percent consensus gives extraordinary power to potential spoilers who enter into a process with the intention of derailing it or stalling as long as possible. If the decision is made to use a collaborative style, it will be helpful to clarify the decision-making parameters at the outset. For example, will the manager seek input and brainstorming from the group but then retain final decision-making authority? Or will the manager defer to the expressed preferences of the group? If the latter route is adopted, will decisions require 100 percent consensus or something less, such as a simple majority vote, a supermajority vote, consensus minus one or two, and so forth? Voting is a process that matches the **competitive style** of decision making yet it can be combined with participant input, dialogue, and collaboration to create a process deemed fair, participatory, and efficient.

As a manager, you cannot seek consensus on every decision. Employees do not want to be bothered for their input on issues they view as noncritical or decisions they feel should be reserved for managers. The more they trust their managers, then the less they will feel their input is needed on smaller decisions. The tricky part is for managers to have a good understanding of where these lines are drawn. Sometimes a collaborative manager should seek input from one or more employees by asking whether this is a decision in which they wish to be involved. Sometimes they will say, “No, thanks. I trust your judgment on this one.” In that case, your inquiry has signaled that you value their feelings and that you understand the decision will likely affect them and their work. Reserve the use of collaborative decision making for the following instances: when others have the information needed to make a good decision, when buy-in will be needed in order to effectively implement the decision, when there is likely to be push back if input is not sought, when there is adequate time for input and discussion, and when you seek to build or repair relationships with others.

Compromise

The **compromising style** indicates a preference for splitting the difference between the negotiator's positions. Compromise can be a quick, efficient way to reach a solution. For example, in hiring negotiations, an employer offers the prospective employee a salary of \$60,000 and she counters with a request for \$70,000. The two quickly decide the most efficient and fair outcome would be to settle at \$65,000. Both got part of what they wanted and left the negotiation feeling that the process was fair. The negotiation was relatively short and painless. The compromising style is appropriate when a decision is not highly important, the time for negotiation and discussion is relatively short, and the process needs to be viewed as fair to all parties. One risk of using compromise is that value might be left on the table so to speak. For example, what if the employee offered to take on additional duties that would have otherwise required the hiring of a part-time employee in exchange for the previously requested \$70,000 salary? By engaging in discussions to learn more about each negotiator's needs, it may be possible to reach a solution that is better for everyone. Compromise often misses these opportunities.

One of the most widely known stories of compromise comes to us from biblical and Koranic lore: the story of wise King Solomon. In the story, a mother had accidentally rolled over on her own baby, killing it as they both slept. In her grief she stole another woman's baby and claimed it as her own. The two women came before King Solomon, asking him to determine the true mother of the infant. In his wisdom, Solomon stated that he intended to use a sword to cut the baby in half so that each mother could lay claim to half the child (an example of the compromising style). One of the mothers cried out that she would give up her claim to the baby and allow the other mother to have the child. Solomon knew this was the baby's true mother and awarded the baby to her.

This story illustrates the largest flaw in the compromising style. It focuses on creating a fair process (you each get equal amounts) but can ignore even better solutions that lie unexplored. The compromising style encourages game playing rather than the open and sincere expression of needs, goals, and limitations. It encourages parties to "start high" instead of telling each other what is really desired and why. It sometimes leads negotiators to miss opportunities for joint gains that might occur if a more collaborative style were used. To return to the earlier salary negotiation example, the employer may have been willing to go as high as \$80,000 but the potential employee started low so as to make it look like she was "being nice." Although the higher salary of \$65,000 was appreciated,

what if the job applicant really wanted a flexible work schedule and was willing to sacrifice some pay in order to obtain that type of schedule? Perhaps this would have been acceptable to both sides in the negotiation, yet the needs that lay underneath the monetary amounts were not fully discussed, so they walked away with an agreement but not one that met all of their needs as fully as a collaborative negotiation could have accomplished.

If you scored high on compromising (seven or above) and on accommodating, then you may leave negotiations feeling a bit disrespected or taken advantage of. You generally start off your negotiations using the compromising style because you see it as fair, but if the other side is a tough negotiator, you give in rather than risk the chance of hurting the other person's feelings or damaging the relationship.

What to do to improve? Choose carefully among the different conflict styles so as to use the one that best matches your needs in any particular situation. Be sure you have a number (or other end result) in your head that is your bottom line before you enter the negotiation and only change that bottom line if new information comes to light during the negotiation that justifies reconsideration. We will discuss negotiation at greater length in subsequent chapters as well. Communicate to the other party about *why* you are asking for *x* or *y*. Invite the other party to brainstorm solutions that are mutually satisfying in regards to solving the problem or reaching a negotiated agreement. If the other person is unwilling to engage in this type of conversation or unwilling to reach what you view as a fair compromise, consider walking away from the negotiation and telling him or her you need time to think about it. This may make the person reconsider his or her willingness to compromise or to engage in collaboration with you.

Competition

The competitive style indicates a preference to win as much as you can, even at the expense of the other side or damage to the relationship between negotiators. You have probably heard the cliché that individuals tend to have either a fight or flight response to conflict. Of course, the responses we are examining here are much more nuanced and varied. However, if the avoidant style represents flight, then the competitive style represents fight. High scores on this style (seven or higher) tend to reflect individuals with strong opinions with a tendency to make decisive unilateral decisions. These individuals often correspond to a Type A on a Myers-Briggs assessment and are commonly found in leadership roles or sales

positions. They tend to communicate directly and are more concerned about the outcome of a decision than they are concerned about the feelings of others. We call this a focus on task over relationship. These individuals may also err in believing that many interactions are competitions with zero-sum outcomes, when in reality the situations are more amenable to negotiations that yield joint gains for both parties, effecting win-win outcomes. Individuals scoring high on the competitive style are often viewed by others as overly assertive, pushy, or insensitive. Individuals who scored low on this style (three or lower) tend to score high in either the accommodating or avoiding conflict styles. As a result, these individuals are often seen as pushovers who will not advocate for themselves or their team even when it makes sense to do so.

When does a competitive response to conflict make sense? Some situations, such as elections or sporting events, are inherently structured as competitions and they call for competitors. However, many organizations inject competition into the workplace in ways that result in unintended negative consequences. For example, an internal sales competition may result in attempts to steal clients from other team members rather than from other firms or organizations, or to sabotage the efforts of team members in order to win. The trick with the competitive spirit is to harness its energy in positive directions and remember to correctly identify those areas in which competition results in the best possible outcomes. When done correctly, competition can result in increased productivity and healthy camaraderie. When done poorly, competition pits team members against each, leading to hard feelings and negative outcomes.

A competitive style of decision making is called for when a unilateral, swift decision is needed because time is short and you, as a manager, believe that your preferred outcome is the only one that is acceptable or in the best interests of the company. It is better to be transparent about this assessment than to pretend to engage in collaboration or compromise, knowing that in the end your decision will be final.

CHOOSING AMONG THE CONFLICT STYLES

As a child you began learning about conflict management by watching your family members and others in your environment. You may have adopted the conflict techniques exhibited by one or more of your family members or you may have developed a style that is opposite because you determined theirs to be dysfunctional. Whichever style(s) you adopted, you have had many years to develop your

current conflict habits. Changing habits feels awkward at first and mistakes or backtracking is to be expected. Eventually, with practice and reflection, choosing the best style or approach will become habitual. Until then, it helps to ask yourself some explicit questions about the problem, decision, or conflict in question:

How important is this issue?

Is there passion around this issue among my employees, superiors, or clientele?

What will likely happen if no action is taken or if action is delayed?

How soon is a decision needed?

Who will be affected by the decision and who will be tasked with implementing the decision?

Would a decision that had the input and expertise of other stakeholders likely be a better substantive decision for addressing the problem?

Do I have the information I need to make a good decision?

How much buy-in will be necessary for the decision to be implemented smoothly?

Do I have the power or authority necessary to make a unilateral decision?

How will a unilateral decision be received by others?

Do others in my organization trust that I will make the best decision possible, even if they are not particularly happy with the outcome of the decision?

How are my preexisting conflict management habits biasing my answers to these questions?

Choosing the Best Response to Conflict

- Is this a no-win situation due to a power asymmetry that is working against you? If so, consider choosing the avoidant style.
- Do you need buy-in from those affected by a decision in order to get it implemented? If so, consider using the collaborative style.
- Does a quick, authoritative decision need to be made? If so, consider the competitive style.

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- Does your colleague care passionately about this issue although it is of minor or moderate importance for you? If so, consider the accommodating style.
- Is time short? Do you need a fair process that allows you and the other negotiator to both get something out of the deal? If so, then consider a compromising style.

It is also important to note that your choice of a specific conflict management response will need to take into consideration the context of the dispute, its importance to the organization and individual employees, whether the conflict or project is in its early or late phases, and the preferred style or approach of those with whom you work.

As you strive to be more analytical and proactive in your approach to dealing with conflict, do not be too hard on yourself or on those around you. You are developing a deeper cognitive framework for understanding conflict and its management, but changing patterns of behavior takes time and practice. Allow yourself a “do-over” when you catch yourself falling back into old, destructive patterns of communication or decision making. If you are explicit with others about your desire to improve these skills, you are likely to find that your colleagues and employees are not only open to working *with* you, but they will also appreciate that you are trying to develop your abilities in these areas. At the end of this chapter, check out the goal-setting section to get started on making improvements in your conflict management habits.

THE LANGUAGE OF CONFLICT

We learned how to manage conflict the same way we learned language—by watching and listening to those around us. Our conflict management style(s) is likely to be either a close replica of one we learned at home or it was adopted as a reaction against what we learned there. The way in which we communicate our approach to conflict includes verbal and nonverbal signals that we give to others, either purposefully or subconsciously. Just as every spoken language has rules of grammar and punctuation, so does the language of conflict. However, for

most people the unspoken rules or norms of conflict management, also known as *the language of conflict*, have never been explicitly discussed except at the most obvious level, with statements such as “Tommy, we don’t hit” or “We have a zero tolerance policy for bullying.” The rules vary within each family or organization and within each of the five conflict styles discussed in this chapter. When individuals exhibit a conflict style that is different from that of the group (such as at work or with in-laws), it seems as if they are breaking an unwritten and unspoken rule, one that everyone should know. Because we learned our language of conflict through the osmosis of watching the world around us, we implicitly believe that everyone saw the same world that we saw and therefore they should have learned the same lessons. When someone’s communication mode or approach to problem solving really irritates you, ask yourself, “What approach to conflict is he using and how different is it from my preferred mode?” You may find that it is the difference in styles that is the obstacle to smooth interactions more than the preferred outcomes voiced by each party to the conflict.

By way of example, let’s revisit the scenario at the beginning of this chapter with John and Maria. At the Bureau of Reclamation, Maria has previously called in sick when she was dreading her work more than usual. Annual review day definitely falls into that category. John has not complained before and therefore Maria concludes that it must not bother him too much when she calls in sick. In Maria’s family people communicate very directly and they tend to fall more into the competitive conflict style. The rules for communicating under this style tell us that if someone has something to say, then she should say it regardless of the other’s feelings. If people do not come forward to tell others they have a problem, then either they do not have a problem or they aren’t playing by the rules.

Communication Rules in Aggressive Organizations

- Practice the rules of survival of the fittest.
- Be blunt and to the point, no matter if it hurts someone’s feelings.
- Stake out your positions early and don’t compromise.
- Have an audience when you engage someone in conflict.
- People who don’t engage this way are weak.

John, however, comes from an avoidant and accommodating conflict culture in which emotion is typically conveyed indirectly. Rather than verbally expressing a problem, in John's family they might slam doors, pout, give the silent treatment, or avoid each other until the problem blows over. In competitive conflict environments this would be considered a violation of the unwritten rule of the conflict language. Therefore, it does bother John that Maria calls in sick so much when she is not really sick. But he believes she should be able to pick up on his anger through the indirect signs he sends her, such as how he tries to avoid her when she returns to work while he calms down. John is conflict avoidant, so he has not said anything to Maria before about this problem, but he has had all he can take. He has put up with this behavior for too long already and this is the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back. In a fit of frustration, John calls Maria and yells into the receiver, "If you value your job, you will be back here tomorrow morning at 8 AM sharp and ready to do your part with the performance reviews! Good-bye!" This is what I call the *volcano effect*. Like volcanoes, John's anger and frustration has been bubbling below the surface for a long time, yet on the outside he has appeared placid and calm. Then, something seemingly small has triggered a reaction, or even an overreaction, and his anger can no longer be contained. He lets his temper get the best of him and he erupts like a volcano. This time he lashed out at Maria, the source of his frustration. But sometimes when his temper erupts, his anger spills out to hurt innocent bystanders or even follows him home. It isn't helping his health either because he keeps needing to increase his dose of antacids.

Communication Rules in Conflict Avoidant Organizations and Individuals

- Walk away from conflict whenever possible.
- Don't express strong feelings.
- Sulking, snide comments and the silent treatment are acceptable means of expressing dissatisfaction.
- Others should be able to tell when something is bothering you.

John and Maria communicate in very different ways. John prefers to avoid conflict until it can no longer be avoided. By contrast, in Maria's family if someone

is feeling hurt or upset he or she directly tells the other person what is on his or her mind. For example, Maria's husband recently asked her what she wanted for her birthday and she said, "Nothing, really. Just let me go twenty-four hours without cooking or doing laundry" and she meant it. There was no gift she was secretly wanting, no surprise party in the back of her mind. Not so for John's wife. John's wife communicates indirectly, like John does. If she says she does not want anything for her birthday, what she really means is that he should know what she wants without her having to tell him. Because John knows his wife so well, he knows that she will be offended if he does not get her a nice gift for her birthday, so the goal is to surmise what it is she really wants. By spending time with her and investing in their relationship, he is able to pick up on her subtle cues. Or, perhaps he will call one of her girlfriends to see if she might have a gift idea to share.

In collaborative organizations and families, individuals share their concerns and preferences tactfully and openly. They listen to one another, convey empathy, and seek out mutually acceptable solutions to problems. They do not yell or throw temper fits. They do not avoid one another when a problem exists, sulk, or use the silent treatment. They express confidence that the problem can be solved through respectful and considerate dialogue, taking turns, and sharing in the costs and benefits of any eventual decisions.

Rules in Collaborative Organizations and Individuals

- Have regular meetings to discuss challenges and make decisions together.
- The expression of strong feelings is allowed but sulking and passive aggression is not.
- Good listening and framing skills are used by all.
- Strong relationships are built through shared activities and time spent together.

CONFLICT, COMMUNICATION, AND CULTURE

On a related note, many cultures have a preference for nonverbal and indirect communication. For indirect communication to work well, the communicators need to build deeper, longer-term relationships that provide the context needed

to correctly decode nonverbal or scripted communications. **Nonverbal communication** includes many contextual cues that convey acknowledgment of power dynamics and emotional ties or lack thereof between individuals or groups. Nonverbal communication is conveyed through vocal tone, body language, eye contact, and even such things as clothing, hairstyles, and demeanor, which communicate relative social status and dominance or submission within a chain of command.

All cultures communicate through the use of scripted conversation, which is one in which both parties to the conversation understand what they are expected to say because of prevailing cultural norms that dictate appropriate and inappropriate responses during the conversation. When a US worker asks a casual coworker, “How are you?” there is an implicit understanding that this question really means “hello” and is used to create a friendly tone of greeting rather than as a sincere inquiry into the health or emotional status of the other person. The responder knows that only a few kinds of responses are considered appropriate to this question, with the best one being something akin to, “Fine, thanks. How are you?” However, in some communication cultures, there are many more scripts that cover the acceptable conversations between a supervisor and employee or between casual acquaintances. In these cultures, context and power relations are key to understanding the meaning that the speaker wishes to convey. Context can include the known power dynamics between the communicators as well as the place or timing of the communication.

High-context cultures for communication are those in which the majority of meaning is conveyed via nonverbal means such as eye contact, tone, the use of silence, and scripted conversations. *High context* refers to the degree to which one must understand the context of the conversation in order to understand the intended meaning. In high-context cultures the burden of understanding falls to the listener, not the speaker. If the listener understands the context well enough and has nurtured a strong relationship with the speaker, then she will understand the intended meaning of the communication. Relationships are attended to first and tasks or activities second. High-context cultures tend to be more rigidly hierarchical and homogeneous, which allows for the development of shared norms governing communication. Typically, social harmony is highly valued, which means that conflicts are often addressed indirectly through informal mediators or emissaries rather than directly. High-context communication cultures developed

in relatively isolated and homogenous societies with low levels of immigration (e.g., Japan, Finland, and Hawaii). This isolation facilitated the development of shared norms of behavior in various settings. Avoidance and accommodation are more common styles in these cultures than competition or compromise. The United States is considered to be a **low-context culture** in which most of the meaning is conveyed in the explicit verbal conversation as opposed to being implied through the context, nonverbal cues, or the use of scripted conversations. In low-context cultures the burden of understanding falls on the speaker. If the speaker is clear enough, then the listener will likely understand the intended meaning. Low-context cultures developed at societal crossroads, in regions with high levels of immigration, or in cultures prone to imperialism, which brought them into frequent contact with foreign cultures (e.g., Great Britain, France, New York City). Low-context cultures tend to score higher on competitive and compromising styles than high-context cultures. It is important to note that an individual's cultural context as well as his or her individual personality traits go a long way to explaining preferred communication and conflict styles. Be sure to avoid stereotyping individuals from cultures different from your own. Individuals may not always exhibit the communication tendencies of their broader cultural group.

HIRING, MANAGING, AND CONFLICT STYLES

Once you have done the work or have been lucky enough to benefit from the work of your predecessors, and your organization exhibits healthy responses to conflicts and problem solving, then ongoing maintenance of that environment is required. Small work units or organizations are highly susceptible to small changes, whereas it takes larger changes to affect huge bureaucratic organizations. One new employee who exhibits destructive communication patterns can be devastating to team productivity and morale in a small team environment.

Hiring employees who share your team's approach to problem solving will be critical to maintaining a positive and productive work environment. You may decide to use tools like the CSI or other assessment tools to help you understand the conflict management habits and approaches of applicants before they are hired. Second, you will want to have explicit discussions with new (and even with existing) employees to share your organization's expectations regarding the

handling of inevitable problems that will arise as well as expectations regarding preferred interaction among team members. For example, you might tell new employees they are highly encouraged to constructively share their feedback, ideas, and concerns with their colleagues and managers. Once that input is received, decisions will be reached that take into account that information as well as other sources of information and the needs of the organization as a whole.

Much of an organization's culture is learned through osmosis, meaning that it permeates the organization's methods of communication and decision making but is not explicitly stated. Every organization has written (e.g., policies) and unwritten ways of doing things. This is especially true of communication styles. Learning the cultural norms of the organization as well as the expectations of its team members will be furthered by lots of professional and social interaction among team members. Getting to know one another deeply will help to facilitate the smooth functioning of an organization and form a reserve of good will to be called on in difficult times. It is the manager's job to encourage, promote, and create opportunities for relationship building between employees in order to make this happen. Great managers foster an environment in which great things happen. They hire hard-working yet personable employees, create policies and procedures that are rational and reward positive behaviors and achievements, and they set the stage for team building and camaraderie, which creates a happy work environment, reduces turnover, and shows employees they are valued and appreciated. Learning more about your own conflict style will help you as you work toward constant improvements in your decision-making and communication skills.

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE AND THE COLLABORATIVE MANAGER

Emotional intelligence (EI) refers to the ability to perceive, control, and evaluate emotions in oneself and others (see Cherry, 2012; Salovey & Mayer, 1990). Emotional intelligence can be further broken down into four factors: the perception of emotion, the ability to reason using emotions, the ability to understand emotion, and the ability to manage emotions. Individuals vary in their ability to correctly perceive the emotional states of others through the interpretation of body language, tone, and facial expressions. Emotion plays an important role in the prioritization of tasks or determining the importance of different events or

activities. Some individuals are better at using emotion for these purposes than others. In addition to correctly perceiving emotion, individuals need to be able to connect the dots to correctly link up the causal factors leading to particular expressions of emotion. For example, your employee may be agitated because it is time for her performance review or because she just found out she is being audited by the Internal Revenue Service (IRS). The manager's reaction to the employee would be different for these two events. Finally, individuals differ greatly in their ability to manage their emotional states or react to the emotional states of others. This is particularly important in the field of management because supervisors and managers are asked to respond to crises, make decisions that affect many people, and communicate the reasons behind those decisions to affected populations.

There is some debate as to whether emotional intelligence is fixed at birth or whether it can be learned. In either case, knowing your own strengths and weaknesses in emotional intelligence can equip you to ask better questions, direct more of your attention to the emotional states of others or yourself as need be, and monitor your own response to emotions. Hypothetically, understanding EI should help you during the processes of hiring and team formation. One would predict those with greater EI would work better with others, whereas low EI might indicate a need to place an employee on tasks that can be accomplished more independently. However, research into EI remains in its early stages and support for the linkages between EI scores and leadership abilities have not been proved (Harms & Credé, 2010). As this research evolves, what we can say from anecdotal evidence is that managers with good emotional control and empathy tend to create more stable and pleasant working environments. Employees or managers who struggle with emotional outbursts or insensitivity to the emotions of others can create difficult working environments.

CONCLUSION

The first step in improving your managerial skills is to take stock of them. Understand how you communicate and respond to conflict. Know your own level of emotional intelligence and find strategies to compensate for areas of weakness (e.g., using listening skills more purposefully, wording comments constructively, etc.). Understanding common responses to conflict will help you to choose among those responses more explicitly when problems arise.

Look around your organization or your competitors. Describe the skill sets of the best managers—those with low turnover, high productivity, and employee-client satisfaction levels. How do they communicate with their employees, peers, and superiors? How do they respond to problems that inevitably arise? Managers who understand themselves will be better able to understand and respond to others.

JOHN AT THE BUREAU OF RECLAMATION

What can John do? Can he control whether or not Maria calls in sick? No, but he can communicate his needs in a way Maria will understand as well as creating and enforcing incentives for productive workplace behaviors. When Maria called in sick before, John might have considered having a one-on-one discussion with her in order to learn more about her concerns, to convey his own concerns to her, and to let her know that he wants to work with her to make her work environment as positive as possible. In order to address this problem as a proactive conflict manager, John called Maria back and said, "I know that some days are harder than others around here. I am dreading these reviews myself, but without your help, I do not think I can get them done at all. What can we do together to make the hard days easier for both of us? How can we work together as a team to handle problems or challenges that might be too much for one person to handle individually? Can you recommend any changes for me to consider so that this process (or others) can be made better for all of us? In the future, when you feel that sense of dread coming on, can you discuss it with me so we can try to get to the root of the problem? Although I can't fix everything, there may be ways we can make improvements so that we both look forward to working here." These are examples that accomplish three things: (1) convey a sense of understanding and sympathy for Maria's feelings, (2) clarify John's needs and concerns in a neutral way, and (3) invite Maria to engage in joint problem solving with John. Although John retains the final decision-making authority as the manager, he has made it clear that he is open to Maria's ideas for ways to improve things at work and that he cares about her as an employee and as a person.

KEY TERMS

Accommodative style
Avoidant style
Collaborative style
Competitive style
Compromising style
Conflict avoidance
Conflict prevention

Conflict styles inventory (CSI)
Denial
Emotional intelligence
High-context cultures
Low-context cultures
Nonverbal communication

SUGGESTED SUPPLEMENTAL READING

- Avruch, K. (2003). Type I and Type II errors in culturally sensitive conflict resolution practice. *Conflict Resolution Quarterly*, 20, 351–371.
- Brackett, M. A., Rivers, S. E., & Salovey, P. (2011). Emotional intelligence: Implications for personal, social, academic, and workplace success. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 5, 88–103.
- Jameson, J. K. (2001). Employee perceptions of the availability and use of interest-based, right-based, and power-based conflict management strategies. *Conflict Resolution Quarterly*, 19, 163–196.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What personal qualities or behaviors make for a great manager? What behaviors or qualities make for a horrible boss?
2. It is likely that different managerial styles work best in different environments. What kind of manager succeeds in your organization and which kind fails to thrive? Why?
3. How can you use the Conflict Styles Inventory outside of work, to improve your family or civic life?

EXERCISES

1. Think about a current or previous problem or conflict in your work environment. Which of the five conflict styles best describes your approach to that conflict? Which style best describes the style(s) used by others in

the conflict? Was the conflict or problem successfully resolved? Why or why not? In groups of two to five, share your stories. What might have happened if you used one of the other conflict styles? Analyze these questions collectively and individually.

2. Although the CSI was developed as an individual-level tool, we often see analogous behaviors within work teams (e.g., departments or units) as well as entire organizations. Which style best describes the unit in which you work or manage? Why? Which style best describes your organization as a whole? How does your individual style fit in with those in your work environment? Discuss.
3. Either individually or in small groups, develop a list of interview questions that you will use for potential new hires. These questions should give you a sense of how this person responds to conflict and how well she or he will fit into your team's environment. In addition to designing appropriate interview questions, what other sources of information will provide clues as to how this person deals with problem solving and teamwork?
4. Think of a current problem or pending decision at work, at home, or in your civic life. Use the questions found in the section "Choosing Among the Conflict Styles" to determine which style is the most likely to achieve a successful resolution to the problem.
5. Choose the best style of decision making for these scenarios: in the last month three out of ten of your employees have come to you to complain that one of their coworkers is shirking responsibility by coming in late, leaving early, leaving his work for others to finish, and so on. You were hoping this employee would take the hint from his coworkers and start to do his fair share of the work but this has not happened. What would it look like if you addressed this situation using each of the five conflict styles discussed in this chapter?

GOAL SETTING

You now have a better understanding about your own conflict management habits and tendencies. How are these working for you? Is there room for improvement? Are you able to consciously choose the best style for each problem you encounter? If not, ask yourself this question: "On a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 equals a conflict

management train wreck and 10 equals masterful conflict management, where do I fall?” Now imagine what behaviors you would need to change in order to move your score up by only one or two points. Write down those behavioral changes as goals to pursue this week. Revisit this question next week and see if you have made any progress and whether new goals are appropriate. Sample questions may include the following:

- How well do I delegate work that can and should be delegated?
- How clearly do I communicate my expectations to my subordinates?
- How clearly do I communicate my needs to my superiors?
- How efficiently do I deal with problems that arise rather than putting off addressing them as long as possible?
- How well do I communicate to my employees that I care about them as people?
- How well do I create opportunities for my employees to get to know each other and develop strong interpersonal relationships?
- How well do I analyze the extent to which a decision should be reached unilaterally versus through a collaborative process?
- How well do I really listen to others?
- How well do I make decisive decisions when they are called for?