

## Dealing with Conflict

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Everyone experiences conflict as a daily reality. Some of these conflicts cause only minor irritation while others provoke more serious consequences.

A manager needs a strategy to resolve conflicts successfully so as to prevent tension or lasting resentment which in turn adversely affects employee morale and productivity.

You will be required to deal with two types of conflicts: conflict which may arise between or amongst your employees and conflict between you and one of your employees.

Whatever the nature of conflict, certain characteristics about conflict seem to hold true.

### Characteristics of Conflict

- When conflict arises, the “issue” is not always articulated or clearly understood.
- People in conflict don’t always take the time to understand one another’s positions.
- When people disagree, their discussions are frequently heated, tense, combative.
- Conflict situations are often avoided, not discussed and resolved.
- Conflicts are sometimes resolved by one person “giving in”.
- The effect of conflict on a relationship is frequently negative.

If you are involved in a conflict, keep the following strategies in mind:

- Remain calm. Don't argue or make accusations.
- Listen actively. Check your understanding of what is being said. Try to learn what is important to the other person.
- Use direct communication. State your feelings and what you mean honestly. Avoid manipulating or withdrawing. Deal with issues and behaviour, not personalities.
- Be persistent and consistent in your behaviour. This communicates that you mean what you say.
- Be confident — in yourself and in your ability to deal with others. Remember your assertive rights.

The following steps will assist you to resolve conflicts as effectively as possible.

Steps for Resolving Conflict		
Step #	Method	Specific Actions
Step 1	Problem Identification	Identify the opposing objectives that have led to the conflict situation.
Step 2	Problem Diagnosis	Diagnose the factors involved in the conflict. Analyze the behavior styles of the parties involved in the conflict.
Step 3	Generate Alternatives	Determine strategic ideas to improve or change the conflict behaviours and style.
Step 4	Decision Making	Compare the styles and decide which style provides the best alternative.
Step 5	Tactical Planning	Brainstorm some tactics or specific behaviours. Make a specific action plan as determined by the decisions made in Step 4.
Step 6	Implementation	Carry out the plan and follow-up regularly.

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While these steps should lead to a solution for most conflicts, there may be times when the conflict isn't resolved. If that occurs, here are your alternatives:

If conflict isn't resolved and you have authority:

- acknowledge the person's right to differ
- explain your decision and outline what you expect to happen.

If conflict isn't resolved and authority is equal or shared:

- thank the person
- ask, "Who might help?"
- end the discussion

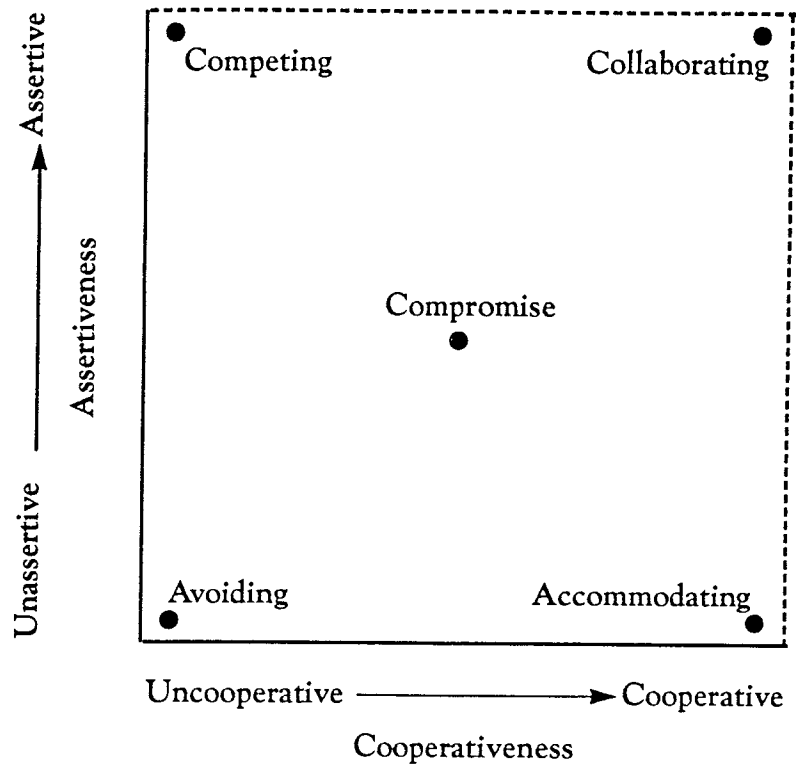
## Conflict Management Styles

The ability to cope successfully with conflict is an important skill for a manager to have. Like much else in dealing with people, the best way to handle conflict depends on the people involved and the situation.

Kenneth Thomas and Ralph Kilmann have developed a conflict management framework which can guide you in choosing the most effective conflict-management behaviour.

When the concerns of two people appear to be incompatible, Thomas and Kilmann say you can describe a person's behaviour along two basic dimensions: (1) assertiveness, the extent to which the individual attempts to satisfy his or her own concerns, and (2) co-operativeness, the extent to which the individual attempts to satisfy the other person's concern.

These two dimensions can be put on a graph and the possible conflict-handling modes can be seen.



The five modes are described as follows:

- **Avoidance:** You do not pursue your own or the others' concerns.
- **Accommodation:** You have a high concern for others' needs and give in to them.
- **Competition:** You are concerned with your own satisfaction only and pursue your concerns at the expense of others. The mode is power-oriented.
- **Compromise:** This is in the centre of the graph and shows a mode in which you are equally concerned with your needs and the others' needs. Compromise never fully takes care of anyone's needs.

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- Collaboration: You have high concern for both your needs and the others' needs. Using this mode, you would work with the other person or people to find a solution which is acceptable to all.

No single mode is necessarily better than the other given particular circumstances, but collaboration and, to a lesser extent, compromise are considered to be the most constructive methods of conflict resolution.

## Uses for the Conflict-Management Modes

### Avoiding

- when an issue is trivial, of only passing importance or when other more important issues are pressing
- when you perceive no chance of satisfying your concerns, e.g. when you have no power to change something (someone's personality, national politics)
- when the potential damage of confronting a conflict outweighs the benefits of its resolution
- to let people cool down
- when you need more time to gather information
- when others can resolve the conflict more effectively

### Accommodating

- when you realize you are wrong - to allow a better position to be heard, to learn from others, and to show that you are reasonable
- when the issue is much more important to the other person than to yourself - to satisfy the needs of others and as a goodwill gesture to help maintain a co-operative relationship.
- when preserving harmony and avoiding disruption are especially important

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- to aid in the development of subordinates by allowing them to experiment and learn from their mistakes

#### Competing

- when quick, decisive action is vital, e.g. emergencies
- on important issues where unpopular courses of action need implementing, e.g. cost cutting, enforcing unpopular rules, discipline
- on issues vital to your business' welfare when you know you're right

#### Compromising

- when goals are moderately important, but not worth the effort or potential disruption of more assertive modes
- when two opponents with equal power are strongly committed to mutually exclusive goals
- to achieve temporary settlements to complex issues
- to arrive at expedient solutions under time pressure

#### Collaborating

- to gain commitment by incorporating other's concerns into a consensual decision
- to find satisfactory solution when both sets of concerns are too important to be compromised
- when your objective is to learn - testing your own assumptions, understanding the views of others
- to merge insights from people with different perspectives on a problem
- to work through hard feelings which have been interfering with an interpersonal relationship

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## Conflict Resolution Example

*Betty has a problem with Bob, a co-worker who constantly interrupts her work with chit-chat, personal problems, etc. As a result, she fails to complete the books in time for the yearly audit. When you call her in to discuss the problem, she becomes angry and accuses Bob of "making her" too slow. Now what?*

- Contact with Betty**
1. Listen to Betty: acknowledge her anger without judging her. Don't rush her: she needs time to let off steam.
  2. Stay calm and ask questions designed to lead Betty towards some possible solutions: communicate that you are concerned.
  3. End the meeting by promising to discuss the matter with Bob.

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- Preparation for Contact with Bob**
1. Get the facts: chat with other employees; review Bob's performance record to determine if he's getting his work done.
  2. Plan for the meeting with Bob; determine possible solutions.

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- Meeting with Bob**
1. Start on a positive note: "How's it going Bob? I sure appreciate your getting the planting done on time."
  2. Clearly explain the problem without judging: nobody responds well to scolding.
  3. Listen to Bob's assessment of the situation and ask questions such as: "Do you have enough work to do? Do you require more challenging responsibilities?" Quickly remove Betty from the

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discussion. Concentrate instead on how to make Bob more productive.

4. Arrive at a mutually agreed upon solution.
5. If Bob is a valuable employee and otherwise doing well, now is the time to tell him so.
6. Schedule a follow-up meeting: stress that the meeting will be to evaluate Bob's progress on a specific project, rather than to just make sure he's not "bugging" Betty.
7. Place written notes of the interview on Bob's file and share a copy with him. Note that these notes are not a letter of censure.