

Dealing with Conflict Positively

Conflict is the inevitable output of workplaces that seek to integrate a broad range of skills and backgrounds and when managed poorly can have a negative effect on both the culture and profitability of an organisation. Kenneth Thomas PhD co-developer of the Thomas/Kilmann conflict model defines conflict as,

‘the condition in which peoples concerns appear to be incompatible’

and suggests that research has shown that depending on their level within the organisation **managers self report that they spend 18-26% of their time dealing with workplace conflicts.** This in itself equates to a large waste of leadership resources but also a potential ineffectiveness of the organisation to make decisions in the best interest of the wider business.

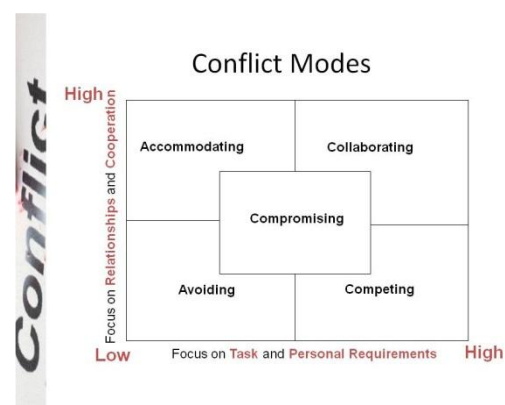
Other debilitating effects of poorly managed conflict are seen in the personalisation of disputes and disagreements leading to **toxic working relationships** and the **polarisation of departmental teams** into theoretical cliques that may ignore evidence if it does not match their perceptual bias. In essence whilst many conflicts may be based on **task and policy issues** the way they are handled may have a much wider ranging effect on the ability of people to work together in the future.

The nature of conflict is rooted in the diverse nature of the workplace population. People may foster competing goals and world views along with different thinking and influencing styles. The management of conflict is therefore an aspect of managing organisational culture and how individuals whether leaders or not seek to influence across the company.

The link of conflict management with other leadership and personal skills such as the approach to influencing others and elements of Emotional Intelligence is apparent.

Effective influencers would endeavour to pull people with them rather than push people into situations they are not committed to whilst **Emotional intelligence** would suggest we should understand ourselves before attempting to understand and manage others.

Thomas and Kilmann have developed a model that can help with the self understanding aspect of conflict management with their **Conflict Handling Modes**. Whilst there are a number of variations to the axis's of this model the one outlined here focuses on the interactions between the drive for **relationships/cooperation** and the drive for achieving the **task and personal requirements**. It might be noted that there is a good link here with the **Blake and Mouton Managerial Grid** which also focus's on the concern for people and production.



By using a diagnostic tool widely available individuals can identify their predominant / type approach to handling conflict and by understanding themselves be more aware of the potential strengths and pitfalls of their approach. This approach will also help people identify the potential approaches and behaviour of others.

The **four approaches** are defined as

Competing. A high focus on the task and personal needs with a low focus on relationships and cooperation can be seen as confrontational and intimidating. The approach is likely to be aggressive either explicitly or passively and whilst this may be appropriate in a crisis can harm relationships and create a compliance environment where concerns may not be aired and lead to poor decision making.

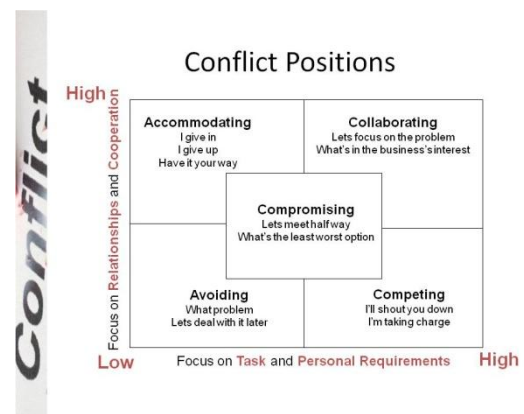
Accommodating. A high focus on relationships and cooperation with a low focus on the task and personal requirements is an approach designed to keep the peace. This is a non assertive approach that puts others needs before their own. This approach can lead to feelings of resentment or passive aggressive approaches such as sabotage. This approach may be useful in a lost cause situation when individuals are trying to save face or maintain relationships but when exhibited too often this approach can exclude the individual from the decision making process and negate that individual as a thinking resource.

Avoiding. This approach has a low focus on both the relationships and the task and is a tactic to avoid or ignore the conflict. This approach can be appropriate if more time is required to gather information or think things through further but can be perceived by others as embodying a don't care attitude. This can be particularly destructive if vital input is required by others to inform their decisions or actions and can contribute to resentment and blaming if things turn out badly.

Compromising. Whilst compromising may seem a positive approach there is nothing to suggest that the acceptance of the least worst shared option will be the best one for the

broader business. Whilst compromising may maintain relationships and get something done it may not be the best thing. An over dependence on compromising can lead to a lack of innovation and a reluctance to implement sometimes unpopular and difficult decisions.

Collaborating. This approach requires trust and respect from participants with an openness and self awareness to explore the motives/goals and concerns of all parties. Whilst the phrase Win/Win may be overused in this case the wins are a well thought out resolution that all parties can support and engage with. This approach provides the right foundations for decisions being seen through and the sustainability of activities. An excellent example of the importance of leadership collaboration can be found in **Ben Heirs book the Professional Decision Thinker.**



In their book **Getting to Yes, Fisher, Ury and Patton** suggest that a potential shared solution to conflict is to focus on the parties' interests rather than their positions.

Positions are defined as predetermined solutions that people will tend to defend in the face of alternatives. This can be a natural psychological reaction as people will tend to want to support their own world view and have their skill/expertise recognised. People who feel that their positions are being attacked may intrinsically feel their own

credibility is being attacked with the subsequent reflex reactions.

By focusing on interests parties focus on the outputs and develop a wider playing field on which to develop solutions. Interests may be unexpressed and made up of individual desires and concerns and related to power/authority and status. This is why trust and respect are prerequisites for collaboration. Of course from an Emotional Intelligence perspective it is important to understand our own interests and those of the business above our own positions prior to attempting to understand others. Here the concept of **naïve listening** – listening without preconceptions is an important skill coupled with incisive questions.

Positive Perspectives. When leaders talk of conflict they usually position it in negative terms with the goal being to minimise the repercussions rather than manage the process. Unless autocratic leaders or aggressive individuals always make the best decisions then this has to be viewed as a mistake. Respectful conflict management can lead to better decisions that have the engagement of all parties and be a route to better relationships and broader modes of thinking. **Edward De bono** in his book **Six Thinking Hats** makes this point very effectively. Leaders who wish to minimise conflict itself in reality wish to minimise participation and involvement which may be a symptom of either insecurity in their position or a lack of knowledge/skill in dealing with it. These **leaders may be adopting an avoiding or competing approach** which will inevitably lead to a reduction in innovation and process improvement. Many leaders complain of a **dependency culture** in which they have to make all the decisions. This may be learnt behaviour driven by their own leadership style.

Nancy kline in her book **Time to Think** suggests **Timed Talk** as an approach to facilitating the exploration of ideas and needs. She has a five step process for this approach;

- Set a timer for three minutes.
- Take turns talking for three minutes – as many turns as is needed.
- Do not interrupt – no matter what.
- If you don't use all your time save it for your next turn.
- Stop talking immediately when the timer goes of.

She makes the point that although this may seem time consuming it is nothing compared to the time taken up in conflict when decisions are not shared and effectively implemented.

In Summery.

- Conflict is inevitable in diverse social populations and should be managed not stifled.
- If everyone thought the same there would be a lot fewer ideas.
- Conflict can be an effective way to build team and organisational synergy.
- Understand your own approach and motives first.
- Focus on interests rather than positions.
- Take time to get the right solution.
- Conflict management is a leadership skill.

References

- Conflict Mode Instrument, Thomas and Killmen, CPP Inc.
- Making Conflict Management a Strategic Advantage. Kenneth Thomas PhD
- Getting to Yes, Fisher, Ury and Patton.

- Time to Think, Nancy Kline.
- Edward De Bono, Six Thinking Hats.
- Ben Heirs, The Professional Decision Thinker.

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