

Conflicts

Conflict: A Personal Definition

Conventional definitions of conflict are important to understand, but how we think about and respond to conflict on a personal level is just as important. After all, our style influences how we interpret and manage conflicts not only in our personal lives, but in our work lives as well—when we sit at the table for staff meetings, supervise staff, and develop agreements with other agencies.

How people handle conflict depends on their upbringing, experiences, values, culture, and temperament. Some members of your team may shy away from conflict and give in rather than explore differences of opinion. Others may feel it is impolite to disagree or argue with another person in public. Others may thrive in jumping into the hot seat.¹

Styles of Handling Conflict²

As you read this section on different ways of handling conflict, think about how you would characterize your own style, as well as the style of one or two particular people you work with.

Competing characterizes an individual who pursues her own concerns, sometimes at another person's expense. This is a power-oriented mode in which the individual may use her power skills, and ability to argue to "win," outrank, etc. A person with a "competing" style does not often shy away from conflict. Rather, she uses the situations to "stand up for her rights," defend a position that she believes is correct, or simply win.

Accommodating is the opposite of competing. An accommodating person often neglects her own concerns to satisfy the concerns of others. Accommodating may take the form of complying with another person's request (even when preferring not to) or yielding to another person's point of view.

Avoiding characterizes a person who does not address conflict; she will take whatever steps she can to pretend the conflict does not exist. Avoiding may take the form of diplomatically sidestepping or postponing an issue, or simply withdrawing from a threatening situation.

Collaborating characterizes a person who makes every attempt to work with others to find some solution that fully satisfies the concerns of all persons. She carefully examines the issue to identify the underlying concerns of all involved, and to find an alternative that meets everyone's concerns.

¹ Adapted from *Partners in Decision Making*, 1993, p. 20

² Adapted from *Personal Conflict Styles Toolbox Activity 6b*. 1994

Compromising characterizes an individual who falls between competing and accommodating. A person who is compromising wants to find an expedient, mutually acceptable solution that partially satisfies the parties involved. Compromising might involve splitting the difference, making an exchange or concession, or seeking a quick middle-ground position.