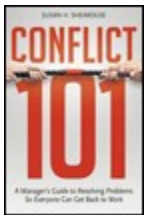

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Recommend? yes no

Chapter 5: How We Respond: Approaches to Conflict

Overview

When Sam gets an e-mail from his boss, giving him another assignment that is due this Friday, Sam reads the e-mail, shrugs to himself, and continues with the project he is working on.

When Tasha gets an e-mail from her boss, giving her another assignment that is due this Friday, she sighs, marks it down on her calendar, and scrambles to add it to her to-do list.

When Marvin gets an e-mail from his boss, giving him another assignment that is due this Friday, he picks up the phone and calls his boss to bargain. "I can't get that project done on Friday, but if you can finish that report I am working on, I'll get the new project mapped out so someone else can fill in the pieces."

When Louisa gets an e-mail from her boss, giving her another assignment that is due this Friday, she calls him on the phone and explains, firmly and clearly, "I can't possibly get that done by Friday. I already have a stack of work to do this week."

When Bernie gets an e-mail from his boss, giving him another assignment that is due this Friday, he puts aside the report he is working on and goes into the boss's office. "What do you need this project for? I need more information. And let me be clear with you about the projects I already have on my plate this week. Let's see if we can devise a solution that works for you and for me."

When we face differences and disagreements, we have choices about how we will respond to the situation. If you were to ask Sam, Tasha, Marvin, Louisa, or Bernie what their approach to that moment was, they may not be able to tell you. Each of them just responded in the way that made the most sense to them. We probably do not spend much time thinking about these choices; we may not even consider that we are making a choice. We respond in a way that we feel is comfortable and right for the situation. Most of us use only one or two approaches nearly all of the time.

Here is a short quiz that will help demonstrate the differences in these approaches. Picture yourself in the middle of a disagreement at work. Which of these statements sounds most like you?

1. I back off and let it go, even if it means that nothing is settled.
2. I prefer to do what others want for the good of the relationship.
3. I focus more on my goals and less on what others want.
4. Everyone should accept a little less than what he really wants so we can get on with the work.
5. I go to great lengths to understand what is important to others and to make sure they understand what is important to me.

Maybe the answer you give depends on whom you are having the disagreement with—your boss, your subordinates, or your peers or teammates. Maybe it depends on how important the disagreement is to you or to the office. Maybe it depends on other things going on in your life at the time, your mood, your health,

the weather, the stock market, or what's happening at home. This list cites five such patterns: avoiding, accommodating, driving, compromising, and collaborating.

Most of us have preferences and patterns for the choices we make. Sometimes our approaches work well. At other times, these patterns may be limiting and self-defeating. The people we work with have their own patterns and preferences, as well. As a manager, understanding your own approaches to conflict can help you make better decisions in how to respond to conflicts you face. Further, understanding more about the approaches of the people you supervise gives you additional tools to manage conflicts effectively.

Over the past thirty years, various authors have written about these different approaches people take.[1] There are assessments available online that can help you identify your own preferences. One of the most accessible of these guides is *Style Matters: The Kraybill Conflict Style Inventory* at http://www.riverhouseepress.com.[2]

In this chapter I present in depth each of these five approaches to conflict listed above. Figure 5-1 is a visual way to understand these different approaches and their relationships to one another. The vertical axis represents concern or energy for one's own goals (wants, needs, expectations), or the goals of the group one belongs to. The horizontal axis represents concern for the relationship or for the other person (or people), his or her wants, needs, and expectations. While the figure helps to explain and understand these differences, bear in mind that there are no distinct boundaries between these approaches.

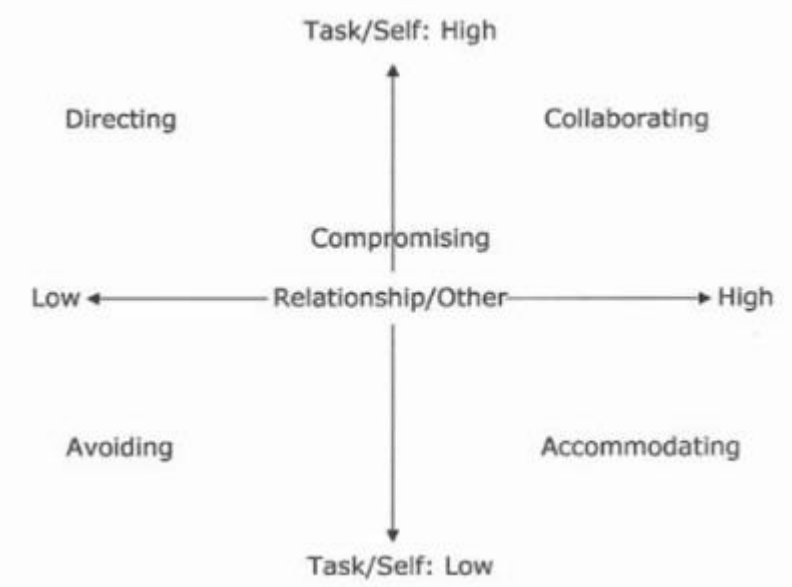

Figure 5-1: Approaches to conflict.

Consider This

As you read the descriptions below, think about your own choices. When things are going smoothly, how are you inclined to respond?

How do you respond when tension rises in a disagreement? Does your reaction pattern shift?

There is no one *right* way to approach conflict. Each of these styles is appropriate in some circumstances, inappropriate in others. One challenge is to learn to use different approaches depending on different circumstances. As behavior specialist Abraham Maslow said, "When the only tool you have is a hammer, every problem looks like a nail."

Another dynamic to recognize is how your preferred style might shift when you are in a stressful situation.[3] If your approach shifts dramatically when the tensions rise, you are likely to create confusion and distrust in those you work with. For instance, if your preferred style is accommodating under normal conditions, and your behavior shifts to directing when your anxiety rises, others are likely to be wary, finding your reactions unpredictable.

For each of the five approaches mentioned earlier, consider how that style can be an appropriate response to conflict. Then look at the downsides of overusing that style. Finally, for each approach, there are tips for working more effectively with another person who uses that approach.

[1]Various authors have created similar charts for understanding these different approaches along a continuum of assertiveness and relationship, including Kenneth W. Thomas and Ralph H. Kilmann, *Thomas Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument* (Tuxedo, NY: Xicom, 1974); and Robert Blake and Jane Mouton, *The Managerial Grid* (Houston: Gulf Publishing, 1964).

[2]Ron Kraybill, *Style Matters: The Kraybill Conflict Style Inventory* (Harrisonburg, VA: Riverhouse Press, 2005).

[3]Ibid, p. 12.

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