Do You Manage Conflict or Does It Manage You? 5 Strategies for Success

Conflict gets a bad rap. Most people tend to view conflict as a bad thing, automatically assuming it has to be an adversarial win or lose situation. The reality is that conflict is inevitable in relationships and it isn’t inherently a negative thing. It depends if you choose to manage the conflict or let the conflict manage you.

I’m a fan of the Thomas Kilmann model of conflict management because of its dispassionate approach to the topic and the practical strategies it offers for its followers. Kilmann defines conflict as any situation where your concerns or desires differ from those of another person. That can be as simple as deciding where to go for dinner with your spouse to something as complex as brokering the details of a huge corporate merger.

According to Kilmann’s model there are five basic modes of handling conflict that result from the amount of assertiveness and cooperation you employ. Each of us tend to have a natural, default mode we use when faced with conflict, but that particular mode isn’t always appropriate for every situation. The key to effectively managing conflict is to understand which mode is most appropriate for the situation given the outcomes you’re trying to achieve. Here’s a quick snapshot of the five modes of managing conflict:

Avoiding – Taking an unassertive and uncooperative approach to conflict defines the Avoiding mode. Sometimes avoiding conflict is the best move. Perhaps the issue isn’t important enough to address or you need to allow some time to pass to diffuse tensions. But of course avoiding conflict can also be harmful because issues may fester and become more contentious or decisions may be made by default without your input or influence.

Competing – High on assertiveness and low on cooperativeness, the competing mode is appropriate when you need to protect yourself, stand up for important principles, or make quick
decisions. Overuse of the competing style tends to result in people around you feeling “bulldozed,” defeated, and un-empowered.

**Collaborating** – The collaborating mode is the highest use of assertiveness and cooperation and is appropriate when your focus is on merging the perspectives of the parties, integrating solutions, and building relationships. Overusing the collaboration mode can lead to inefficiency, wasting time, and too much diffusion of responsibility (because if everyone is responsible, then really no one is responsible).

**Compromising** – Many times people think compromising should be the goal of resolving conflict. I give up something, you give up something, and we agree to settle somewhere in the middle…hogwash! There are certainly times when compromise is the best route, such as when the issue in dispute is only moderately important or you just need a temporary solution. But if you overuse the compromising mode, you can neglect to see the big picture and create a climate of cynicism and low trust because you’re always giving in rather than taking a stand.

**Accommodating** – This mode is high on cooperativeness and low on assertiveness which is appropriate for situations where you need to show reasonableness, keep the peace, or maintain perspective. If you overuse the accommodating mode, you can find yourself being taken advantage of, having your influence limited, and feeling resentful because you’re always the one making concessions to resolve conflict.

Conflict is a natural part of any relationship, and if managed effectively, can lead to deeper and stronger bonds of trust and commitment. The key is to diagnose the situation, determine your preferred outcomes, and use the mode most appropriate to help you achieve your goals.

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