

Navigating Our Differences!

Conflict gets a bad rap as if it is even possible to avoid. The whole point of a more equitable work environment is that more people have a voice in the decision-making conversations. And more voices, by definition, can lead to conflictual interpretations. If each person brings their unique experiences, insight and learning to any aspect of the job, there should be a curiosity around how to best utilize those differences for the collective voice of the company. This helps us frame the process as *navigating different points of view* rather than *managing conflict*. It is how we gather different perspectives on an issue/product into one space and create a common way forward. This allows a company to not only increase employee engagement but also reach a broader audience with its products.

5 styles of conflict management

According to the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument, there are 5 styles of conflict management. Each of these can lead to positive or negative outcomes. There is a time and place for all of them; the key is to know which conflict style to apply to which situation.

Role Playing Exercise

Think about the following conflict management styles and jot down a possible 2-3 minute scenario that we can work through together on our next coaching session.

1. **Accommodating:** You give up what you want in order to keep the peace.

When it makes sense: someone cares more about the issue than you and you aren't even sure that you are in the right.

But... be careful that you are not giving up too easily on something that means a lot to you or you will lose self-confidence in future interactions.

Good Fit: accommodating an angry customer at the front of a long line, in order to serve the other customers in a timely and peaceful fashion.

Not a Good Fit: accommodating overtly racist comments from a co-worker

2. **Avoiding:** You continuously postpone or dodge the issue.

When it makes sense: the conflict seems minor, you need more time to think, or you feel there is no chance of persuading the other person of the merits of your point of view.

But...avoiding conflict does not actually create harmony, it just delays the inevitable conflict. So only use this style when you need to buy time.

Good Fit: Your client is complaining that a product didn't work right. You realize they didn't follow the instructions but instead of pointing that out, you lead them through an instructional so they can comprehend their own error.

Not a Good Fit: You hear that a member of your team is stirring up trouble around a new company policy, feeding misinformation to the rest of the team. You choose to ignore it and are surprised when several team members boycott the new policy, leading to hours of tense meetings as you correct the misinformation.

3. **Compromising:** Tries to find solution that will at least partially please all parties and find middle ground.

When it makes sense: it's more important to reach *a* solution than to reach the *perfect* solution. Even if it's temporary, it's at least some sort of progress.

But...this can end in a lose-lose solution if everyone isn't at least somewhat happy with the outcome and it doesn't necessarily build trust.

Good Fit: You have been asking for a dollar raise for an entire year now and your supervisor keeps telling you there is no budget for it. When you pass your employee evaluation with flying colors, you make your case again, pointing to a cost-cutting measure you made in another department that will more than make up the difference. Your supervisor agrees to a \$.50 cent raise for now with another conversation in the calendar in six months.

Not a Good Fit: You have been planning a family vacation for months and have the time off approved. Your co-worker unexpectedly receives free tickets to a professional football game on the day you are supposed to leave. They cannot attend unless you cover for them. You ultimately bump your plans back a day but resent the request and the fact that your family is mad at you.

4. **Collaborating:** Rather than trying to find a middle ground solution, you really do try to find a solution that meets the needs of all the stakeholders. Win-win for everyone.

When it makes sense: Multiple perspectives need to be addressed, important relationship between parties that needs to be protected and the final solution is too important to leave anyone displeased. You feel the beliefs of diverse stakeholders must be represented in this scenario.

But... the saying “too many cooks in the kitchen” can apply here. Too many collaborators can turn a simple decision into a complicated one that ultimately leads to frustration for everyone. Not every decision requires a town hall meeting.

Good Fit: You have a glitch in your customer processes that is causing problems. You send out a survey to your clients to give them a chance to weigh in on obstacles and possible solutions. You gather those responses as a team and create a plan forward that satisfies everyone.

Not a Good Fit: You need to plan a training for a specific department. You invite 10 people from different departments to the planning meeting but get bogged down on little details and cannot reach consensus. Too many are in the room who are not impacted by the training but are happy to throw opposing opinions around.

5. **Competing:** You take a firm stance and refuse to consider any other perspectives.

When it makes sense: when you have to stand up for your rights or needs, when you need to make a quick decision and bring your team along with you, when you need to end a long-term conflict or when you have to prevent something worse from happening.

But...even as you take a strong stance, be sure to address the “why” of the decisive action or you will lose engagement.

Good Fit: You find out one of your biggest clients has been making sexually inappropriate comments to one of your staff members. You meet with the client and let them know, in no uncertain terms, that while you value your relationship with them, you cannot allow the client to harass your staff, even at the cost of losing them as a client.

Not a Good Fit: Your HR team is planning the all-staff Christmas party. They are thrilled they have been able to secure an amazing venue. You walk in on their meeting and let them know they must use your friend's bar because he needs the business, no questions asked. Then you turn around and walk out.

Regardless of which of these styles comes most naturally for you, the reality is that as a team member, you may need to lean into all of them at one point or another. Remember that conflict can be your friend if you see it as a way forward to create a work environment where everyone listens well to each other and from that listening, creates solutions that help the company succeed in all the right ways. Can't wait to dive a little deeper into this topic with you on our next coaching session.

