

What's Your Leadership Conflict Style? Find out here.

by Michael Warden

"No pressure, no diamonds." Mary Case

Back in the '70s, researchers Kenneth Thomas and Ralph Kilmann identified five main styles of dealing with conflict. Their research showed that people typically have a preferred conflict style. But not every style works effectively in every situation.

As a leader--and most especially, if you are a senior leader--you need to know which conflict style you tend toward most and what the weaknesses of that style can be. And you need to work on developing the conflict styles you feel weaker in. Why? Because your dominant conflict style will likely be mirrored in the culture of the team or organization you lead. If not addressed directly, this dominant conflict style can act like a hidden virus in your cultural system, producing unhealthy team dynamics and undermining your core values.

Thomas and Kilmann's styles are:

1. Competitive (Forcing): People who tend towards a competitive style take a firm stand and know what they want. They usually operate from a position of power, drawn from things like position, rank, expertise, or persuasive ability. This style can be useful when there is an emergency and a decision needs to be made fast, when the decision is unpopular, or when defending against someone who is trying to exploit the situation selfishly. However, it can often leave people feeling bruised, unsatisfied, and resentful when overused.

2. Collaborative: People tending towards a collaborative style try to meet the needs of all people involved, including themselves. These people can be highly assertive but unlike the competitor, they cooperate effectively and acknowledge that everyone is important. This style is useful when you need to bring together a variety of viewpoints to get the best solution, when there have been previous conflicts in the group, or when the situation is too important for a simple trade-off. However, it can become problematic in situations where decisions need to be made quickly or when engaging with someone who isn't willing to collaborate on the issue.

3. Compromising: People who prefer a compromising style try to find a solution that will at least partially satisfy everyone. Everyone is expected to give up something, and the compromiser him- or herself also expects to relinquish something. Compromise is useful when the cost of conflict is higher than the cost of losing ground, when equal strength opponents are at a standstill, and when there is a deadline looming. But if overused, it can create a culture of latent low-grade dissatisfaction where nobody ever really gets to "win."

4. Accommodating: This style indicates a willingness to meet the needs of others at the expense of the person's own needs. The accommodator often knows when to give in to others but can be persuaded to surrender a position even when it is not warranted. This person is not assertive but is

highly cooperative. Accommodation is appropriate when the issues matter more to the other party, when peace is more valuable than winning, or when you want to be in a position to collect on this “favor” you gave. However, people may not return favors, and overall this approach is unlikely to give the best outcomes.

5. Avoiding: People tending towards this style seek to put off or evade the conflict entirely. This style is typified by delegating controversial decisions, putting off difficult conversations until they can no longer be avoided, and not wanting to hurt anyone’s feelings. It can be appropriate when victory is impossible, when the controversy is trivial, or when someone else is in a better position to solve the problem. However, in many situations, this is a weak and ineffective approach to take.

So which conflict style do you prefer?

Once you understand the different styles, you can use them to think about the most appropriate approach (or mixture of approaches) for the situation you’re in. You can also think about your own instinctive approach and learn how you need to change this to lead more effectively. At your next team meeting, have an open conversation about the styles and talk about which styles show up most often on your team. Here are some questions you may find helpful to share:

- How is the way we typically deal with conflict affecting our team culture?
- Which style do we need more of? What would using that style more often do for us?
- Which style do we need less of? What approach could we use instead?
- Which blend of styles best supports our core values (or) will help us create the kind of team culture we want to have?
- What agreements can we make today that will help us engage with conflict more positively?

I hope this is helpful for you. And I’m curious: Which conflict style shows up most often in your leadership or on your team? Why do you suppose that is?

Questions

- The Author said, “You need to work on developing the conflict styles you feel weaker in.” Do you agree or disagree? Why?
- Which of the five styles is your preferred style? How have you seen that working well in the past?
- Which of the five styles is your weakness? In what way has this hurt you in dealing with conflict in the past?