



Navigating Interpersonal Conflict

Introduction

The aim of this module is to provide Youth to Youth Network members with tools that will enable you to:

- ✓ Understand and manage the physiological response created in our bodies when we perceive we are in a conflict
- ✓ Become aware of your own “default” conflict style and the motivations behind it
- ✓ Recognize the other conflict styles people use and the motivations behind them
- ✓ More effectively prevent, resolve and navigate interpersonal conflict
- ✓ Engage in a dialogue on interpersonal conflict with your groups, teams or organizations.

What is conflict?

“Conflict is the condition in which people’s concerns – the things that they care about or need – appear to be incompatible.”¹

There is a perception that interpersonal conflict is always bad or negative (e.g. fighting, blaming, name-calling) but this is not always the case. Conflict within groups, teams, organizations or among individuals can be constructive or destructive. It can push a group or an organization to a new level of functioning or a new, better way of doing things. It can also damage relationships amongst people, reduce trust and the overall effectiveness of the team. What will determine this outcome is the motivations or reasons that are behind the conflict and, how the people involved choose to engage in it. To be effective as an advocate or leader, it is in your interest to become more skilled at recognizing your own tendencies and those of others in dealing with conflict so that you can make more strategic choices for handling conflict in the moment.

What happens when we perceive we are in a conflict?

“Anyone can become angry – that is easy. But to be angry with the right person, to the right degree, at the right time, for the right purpose, in the right way – this is not easy.” – Aristotle

Human beings have evolved over time and so has the way our brain functions. In primitive times, when you perceived a threat it was likely a life or death situation requiring immediate, instinctive action on your part if you were to survive. To help with this situation, there is a part of your brain (the amygdala) with the job to act as a security guard and raise the alarm in your body when you experience a threat. The amygdala physically floods your body with powerful emotions like fear, rage or worry in order to get you ready to take an immediate and necessary action of fighting or fleeing the situation. When this alarm is raised in your brain, your emotions are in control and your ability to think rationally or clearly are greatly reduced.

The problem today is that many of the conflicts or threats we perceive on a daily basis are generally not life or death situations. However, unless we are very aware of our emotions, the same physical

¹ *Introduction to Conflict and Teams*, p.4, Kenneth W. Thomas & Gail Fann Thomas, CPP Inc., 2004.

process will be triggered in our brains as soon as a conflict or threat is perceived. You know you are in the grips of one of these reactions if you start to feel physical things (e.g. chest tightening, shoulders raising, breathing faster or more shallowly), strong emotions (e.g. being scared, hurt, angry, and defensive) or your behaviour change (e.g. raised voices, pointing fingers, being very quiet).

We cannot stop our brain from functioning in this way – nor would we want to. What we can do is learn to recognize this primal reaction for what it is. We can then take a step back and use some of the tools below to figure out what is really going on, what you are feeling, what you need from the situation, what you are prepared to do to resolve it and why.

What is your default conflict style?

Just like the way you are born either right-handed or left-handed, you also likely have a default reaction to handling a conflict. Likely, no one had to tell you with which hand to pick up your pen – you just did it automatically. This does not mean you cannot learn to use your other, non-dominant hand to write – you can. But you would need to learn how to do it first and then practice to become good at it. The same applies for learning a new conflict style.

There are 5 main ways people use to handle conflict. No conflict style is better than the other ones. Each one is useful in some situations and harmful in others.

Below are 10 situations that are common in work or personal life. Please study each situation and the five possible responses. Rank them from 1-5 in the order of your most likely response (5) to your least likely response (1). Please choose a single frame of reference (e.g., work-related conflicts, family conflicts) and keep that frame of reference in mind when responding to all the situations.

Remember – there is no “right” or “better” answer, so try to be as honest as possible!

1. Upon experiencing strong feelings in a conflict situation, you would:

- ☐ A. Enjoy the emotional release and sense of exhilaration and accomplishment
- ☐ B. Enjoy the strategizing involved and the challenge of the conflict
- ☐ C. Become serious about how others are feeling and thinking
- ☐ D. Find it frightening because you do not accept that differences can be discussed without someone’s getting hurt
- ☐ E. Become convinced that there is nothing you can do to resolve the issue

2. Consider the following statements and rate them in terms of how characteristic they are of your personal beliefs:

- ☐ A. Life is conquered by those who believe in winning
- ☐ B. Winning is rarely possible in conflict
- ☐ C. No one has the final answer to anything, but each has a piece to contribute
- ☐ D. In the last analysis, it is wise to turn the other cheek
- ☐ E. It is useless to attempt to change a person who seems locked into an opposing view

3. What is the best result that you expect from conflict?

- ☐ A. Conflict helps people face the fact that one answer is better than others

- ☐ B. Conflict results in canceling out extremes of thinking so that a strong middle ground can be reached
- ☐ C. Conflict clears the air and enhances commitment and results
- ☐ D. Conflict demonstrates the absurdity of self-centeredness and draws people closer together in their commitment to each other
- ☐ E. Conflict lessens complacency and assigns blame where it belongs

4. When you are the person with the greater authority in a conflict situation, you would:

- ☐ A. Put it straight, letting the other know your view
- ☐ B. Try to negotiate the best settlement you can get
- ☐ C. Ask to hear the other's feelings and suggest that a position be found that both might be willing to try
- ☐ D. Go along with the other, providing support where you can
- ☐ E. Keep the encounter impersonal, citing rules if they apply

5. When someone you care for takes an unreasonable position, you would:

- ☐ A. Lay it on the line, telling him or her that you don't like it
- ☐ B. Let him or her know in casual, subtle ways that you are not pleased; possibly distract with humor; and avoid a direct confrontation
- ☐ C. Call attention to the conflict and explore a mutually acceptable solution
- ☐ D. Try to keep your misgivings to yourself
- ☐ E. Let your actions speak for you by indicating depression or lack of interest

6. When you become angry at a friend or colleague, you would:

- ☐ A. Just explode without giving it much thought
- ☐ B. Try to smooth things over with a good story
- ☐ C. Express your anger and invite him or her to respond
- ☐ D. Try to compensate for your anger by acting the opposite of what you are feeling
- ☐ E. Remove yourself from the situation

7. When you find yourself disagreeing with other members of a group on an important issue, you would:

- ☐ A. Stand by your convictions and defend your position
- ☐ B. Appeal to the logic of the group in the hope of convincing at least a majority that you are right
- ☐ C. Explore points of agreement and disagreement and the feelings of the group's member, and then search for alternatives that take everyone's views into account
- ☐ D. Go along with the rest of the group
- ☐ E. Not participate in the discussion and not feel bound by any decision reached

8. When a single group member takes a position in opposition to the rest of the group, you would:

- ☐ A. Point out publicly that the dissenting member is blocking the group and

- _____ suggest that the group move on without him or her if necessary
- _____ B. Make sure the dissenting member has a chance to communicate his or her objections so that a compromise can be reached
- _____ C. Try to uncover why the dissenting member views the issue differently, so that the group's members can re-evaluate their own positions
- _____ D. Encourage the group's members to set the conflict aside and go on to more agreeable items on the agenda
- _____ E. Remain silent, because it is best to avoid becoming involved

9. When you see conflict emerging in a group, you would:

- _____ A. Push for a quick decision to ensure that the task is completed
- _____ B. Avoid outright confrontation by moving the discussion toward a middle ground
- _____ C. Share with the group your impression of what is going on, so that the nature of the impending conflict can be discussed
- _____ D. Forestall or divert the conflict before it emerges by relieving the tension with humour
- _____ E. Stay out of the conflict as long as it is of no concern to you

10. In handling conflict between your group and another, you would:

- _____ A. Anticipate areas of resistance and prepare responses to objections prior to open conflict
- _____ B. Encourage your group's members to be prepared by identifying in advance areas of possible compromise
- _____ C. Recognize that conflict is healthy and press for the identification of shared concerns and/or goals
- _____ D. Promote harmony on the grounds that the only real result of conflict is the destruction of friendly relations
- _____ E. Have your group submit the issue to an impartial arbitrator

HOW TO SCORE YOUR TEST:

For each question, insert your score of 1 to 5 for each response from A-E. Add up the numbers in each column and record it in the space provided. Take your totals and insert them into the conflict style categories below. Your highest total is your most typical conflict style. Your lowest total is the style you least prefer.

QUESTION #	A	B	C	D	E
1					
2					
3					
4					
5					
6					
7					
8					

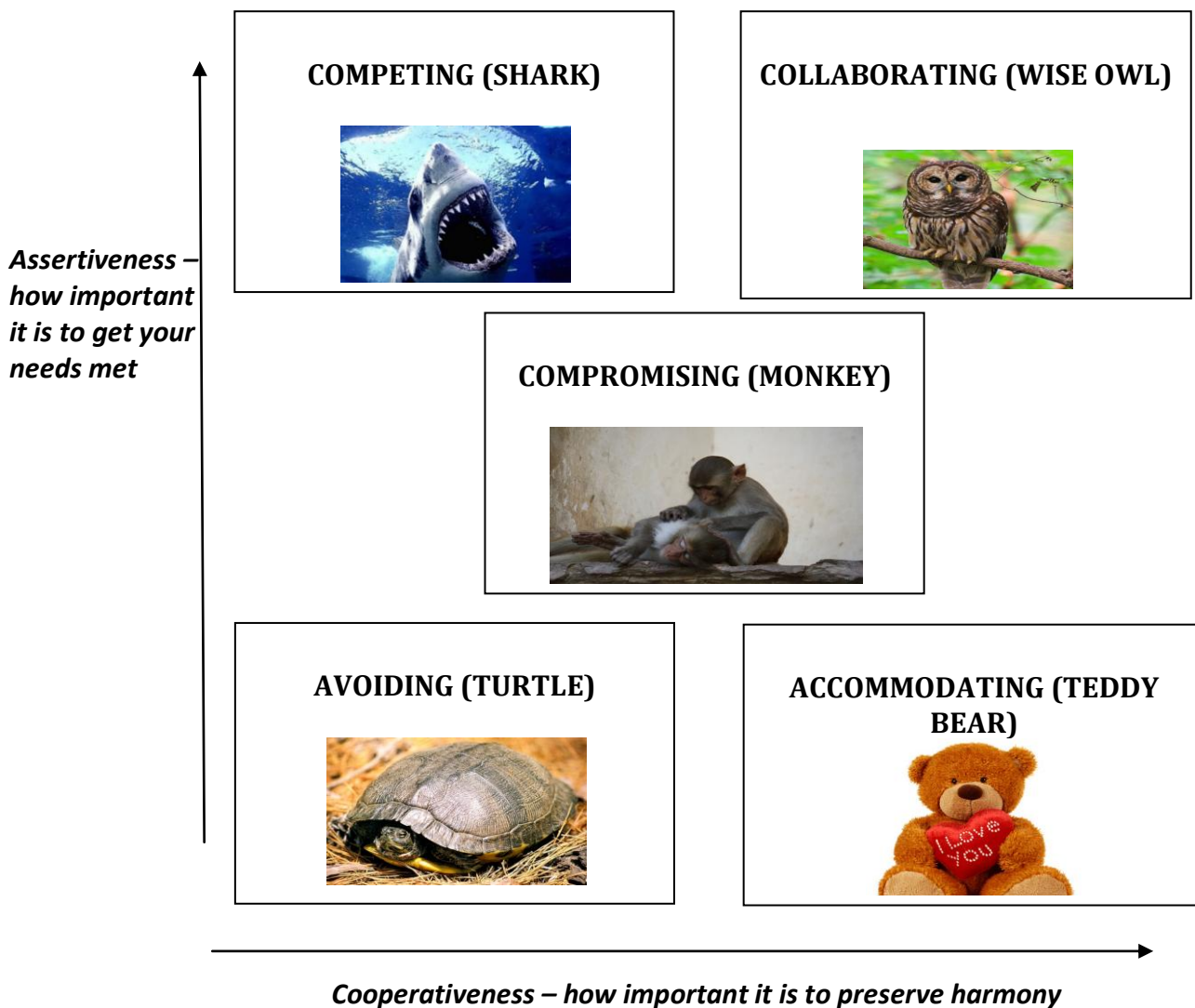
9					
10					
TOTALS:					

COMPETITIVE (COLUMN A)	
COMPROMISER (COLUMN B)	
COLLABORATOR (COLUMN C)	
ACCOMMODATOR (COLUMN D)	
AVOIDER (COLUMN E)	

My most preferred conflict style is: _____

My least preferred conflict style is: _____

THE 5 CONFLICT STYLES



AVOIDING

This style is not assertive or cooperative. It is a style where you lose and I lose. You sidestep the conflict without satisfying your concerns or those of the other person. You use it when:

- The issue or relationship is not important or dangerous to you
- You want to avoid someone who is troublesome to you
- You want to postpone a discussion until a later time in order to give someone time to cool down

+	-
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Reduces stress by not dealing with people or issues that are not important to you- Helps you steer clear of dangerous situations or interactions- Saves your time and energy- Useful when others can solve the conflict more effectively than you- Gives you an opportunity to have time to set up more favourable conditions to deal with the conflict	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Does not build or maintain relationships- Can create resentment and mistrust of you by others- Poor communication is encouraged which could result in poor decisions being made- No one gets what they want and feelings could be hurt

ACCOMMODATING

This is a style that is high in cooperation but low in assertiveness. It means that you choose to satisfy the other person's concerns over your own. You use it when:

- You know that you are wrong
- The issue is more important to the other person than it is to you
- You want to build up some "social credit" to cash in later when something is important to you
- Preserving the relationship is more important than winning

It looks like deferring to authority (e.g. you're the boss, it's your call!), doing someone a favour, appeasing someone to calm them down (e.g. OK - have it your way!) or deferring to someone else's expertise (e.g. you are the expert, you know better than me).

+	-
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Useful when you want to help someone out- Helps restore harmony in a group or relationship where there is conflict- Helps build and maintain relationship, creates goodwill- Helps you cut your losses and move on to	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- You are sacrificing your own concerns or something that you care about- Others may not always recognize your "social credit" when you try and cash it in on something important to you- Loss of enthusiasm or motivation by agreeing

other things	to things you don't really agree with or care about - People may take advantage of your accommodating nature
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COMPROMISING

This is a style that sits in the middle of cooperation and assertiveness. It means we both win some and lose some. It can look like making a deal (e.g. let's split the difference between what you want and I want) or taking turns (e.g. I will pay for lunch this time, you pay next time). You use it when:

- It is impractical for you to try to fully satisfy your needs and get your way through competing or collaborating (e.g. when you know for a fact that there is not enough resources for you both to get what you want, like in budget or labour negotiations)
- You need a temporary, quick solution to a larger problem to keep people in the room and give them a sense of moving forward
- A decision needs to be made quickly
- Being more assertive would harm a relationship that you need

+	-
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - It is a practical, speedy solution to come to a decision - It is fair (e.g. you get something you want and I get something I want and we both lose a little too) - Helps maintain relationships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Partial solutions that may come back to haunt you or the other person if this really was not the best decision – another conflict could come up - Compromise solutions are generally less innovative and creative than collaborative ones - Decision may not reflect actual agreement between people or reflect how people really feel about a decision

COLLABORATING

This style is high in assertiveness and high in cooperation. It is used when you are trying to find a win-win (I win, you win) solution that meets the needs of both you and the other person. You are deciding not only to address the conflict but dig into it to understand the reasons behind it. You use it when:

- Both concerns are vital to the organization or relationship
- You want to learn more about the other person or issue
- You need a high level of commitment to the decision or path of action
- You need to work through problems in a relationship

+	-
- Best option for increasing communication	- Collaborating does not work if the decision

and learning between people - Can result in high-quality decisions that people have a strong commitment to implementing - Strengthens relationships	needs to be quick or if there is not enough trust between the people - Takes a lot of time and energy - Risk that the decision made is a poor one just to reach a conclusion acceptable to both people
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COMPETING

This is a style that is high in assertiveness and low in cooperation. It is used when you take a position that puts your own needs or viewpoint ahead of other peoples. It is a win-lose method (I win, you lose). You use it when:

- You know you are right and you are seeing the “big picture” that others are not
- The issue is important and vital to your own welfare or that of others (e.g. taking a stand to defend something you believe in) or requires an unpopular course of action (e.g. the organization you manage needs to cut costs to save money)
- You need to protect or defend yourself from people taking advantage of your non-competitive behavior

When someone is using a competing style, it can look like:

- Imposing or dictating a decision (e.g. I am sorry but I am your supervisor and that is the way it needs to be)
- Arguing for a conclusion only using information that supports your case (e.g. the organization is losing money, we need to restructure everyone’s jobs and I need to lead this process)
- Hard bargaining or ultimatums (e.g. I want a raise in salary or I quit)

+	-
- Standing up for your interests and making sure your points are being taken seriously - Possibility of a quick win by pressing hard for your points and hoping others back down - Self-defense when you are feeling attacked or taken advantage of	- Strained work or personal relationships as people don’t like working with you or you have hurt their feelings - Win-win possibilities are overlooked - Stops the information from flowing as imposing your views this way does not promote a dialogue - Getting deadlocked if the other person also adopts a defensive posture in self defense

Strategies for Navigating Interpersonal Conflict

- Keep a journal and take note of when you experience a conflict. How did you feel in the moment? How did you react? What did you think you were reacting to? Question your feelings and assumptions - was this the only way to feel in this situation? What are the facts of the situation: what did you see or hear versus what you felt? Did you make up a story about the other people’s motivations and behaviour to justify your own? What needs were you trying to

get met? What were the needs of the others? What, if anything, would you try and do differently next time?

- Be curious! Whether you are experiencing an interpersonal conflict yourself or observing others in conflict – ask yourself and/or others these questions. What is really at stake here for the organization or the individuals? What needs are both parties trying to get met? Is this a productive or unproductive conflict? Is there another way to meet these needs?
- Engage your group, team or organization in a discussion about how they feel about interpersonal conflict, their typical reaction and what they need most from others during this time. One way to do this is to have one group member hold a sign that says “CONFLICT”. Ask group members to position themselves around the room in relation to the “CONFLICT” indicating their degree of comfort in addressing it. Some people may be turned towards the “CONFLICT” and some people may be turned away. Ask members to explain their position.
- Get your group, team or organization to take the conflict style test. Map out your team conflict profile. Do you have a majority or minority of a certain style on the team? Do the results for individuals in the team feel true? What is important for each of you to understand about each other during a conflict? What could you agree to do differently for each other when conflict arises?

Sources

- *Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument*, Kenneth W. Thomas; CPP Inc., 2002
- *Introduction to Conflict Management*, Kenneth W. Thomas; CPP Inc., 2002
- *Introduction to Conflict and Teams*, Kenneth W. Thomas & Gail Fann Thomas; CPP Inc., 2004.
- *Crucial Conversations: Tools for talking when stakes are high*, Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan, Al Switzler; McGraw-Hill, 2002
- *The Brain and Emotional Intelligence: New Insights*, Daniel Goleman; More Than Sound LLC, 2011