



## Managing Conflict

By Beth Bratkovic

When approached in a constructive way, conflict can create and enhance ideas, opportunities, growth, relationships, and business outcomes.

*“Where all think alike, no one thinks very much.” — Walter Lippmann*

Conflict can create emotions of excitement, sadness, fear, anger, or joy. When approached in a constructive way, it can create and enhance ideas, opportunities, growth, relationships, and business outcomes. But handled incorrectly, conflict can be costly. According to one study, “Conflict is inevitable — 85 percent of employees experience conflict to some degree (typically around 2.8 hours per week)... Conflict is costly — at least \$359 billion in paid hours this year.”<sup>1</sup>

The more differing perspectives that are represented in the resolution of a business issue or problem, the higher probability for an excellent outcome — or at least the best solution possible. But at the same time, the more perspectives differ, the higher the likelihood for conflict. The trick is balancing the need for better, stronger ideas and practices with people’s need for comfort and safety.

### CONFLICT STYLES

Some individuals are hard wired for conflict; they are the competitors. We know them as athletes, sales teams, competitors in some way, shape, or form. They enjoy conflict; in fact, many thrive on it. This group needs guidance in managing conflict.

Then there are those who avoid conflict and want nothing to do with it.

They may focus on accommodating others so no one gets uncomfortable. Conflict makes their skin crawl (literally, in some cases; there are those who break out in rashes from the stress conflict causes them), their stomachs hurt, their heads ache. They consider conflict a categorically bad thing, which can cause them to keep their creative ideas, differing perspectives, and input to themselves to avoid offending others. This group needs new skills, language, and filters to help them manage conflict in constructive and productive ways that are comfortable for them.

Finally, there is a third group who are the collaborators and compromisers. These individuals are always looking for a win/win situation or a middle ground in which everyone is accommodated. Most people consider themselves to be in this group, but that is not really the case.

All of the above styles are appropriate in certain situations. Issues arise, however, when we rely on one specific style for every situation. This can result in ineffective outcomes such as injured relationships, lack of creativity, recurring conflicts, unmet needs (for both the individual and the organization), bad decisions, and so forth.

There are many tools one can use to manage conflict more productively. This article will focus on language to define the main styles of dealing with conflict, how perceptions affect

conflict, and strategies for understanding intent and slowing down knee-jerk reactions.

## **WAYS OF DEALING WITH CONFLICT**

There are five preferred styles for dealing with conflict, as measured with the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument, which is influenced largely by the management grid developed by Robert R. Blake and Jane Mouton.<sup>2</sup> This model uses axes to identify an individual's preferred style: focus on issue and focus on relationship. A competitor will have a high focus on the issue and a low focus on the relationship, while an avoider will have a low focus on the issue and a low focus on the relationship. An accommodator will have a high focus on the relationship and a low focus on the issue; a compromiser, a mid-level focus on the relationship and a mid-level focus on the issue; and a collaborator, a high focus on both the issue and relationship.

These words provide a filter you can use to start assessing yourself and others when dealing with conflict. If you lean toward avoiding or accommodating, are you dealing with a competitor who will ensure a win/lose situation as the end result? If you are a competitor, are you leaving differing perspectives on the table so that you can “win” or “be right,” while perhaps negatively affecting the health of the relationship or the effectiveness of solutions that are presented? Are you collaborating to the point of being seen as wishy washy and wasting the time of others? Or are you comfortable with all five styles, approaching each situ-

ation based on what is likely to work best in a given situation?

The key to using this tool is understanding each of the styles and adjusting your individual style as needed. Maintain flexibility and adaptability based on the situation and the style of the person or people with whom you are dealing. Gaining a clearer understanding of what drives another person's behavior — whether that person is focused on relationship, issue, both, or neither — will help you have a more effective, constructive conversation.

## **PERSONAL CONFLICT METAPHOR**

The way we view things is really only a reflection of our beliefs about ourselves, and not necessarily an objective picture of what's really happening. In fact, as TV's Dr. Phil says, “There is no reality — only perception.”

The phrase “perception is reality” has become an adage, and the concept is useful when considering your own personal perception of conflict, how it is described or played out in your mind. If you had to define conflict as a personal metaphor, what would your metaphor be? Do you see conflict as a boxing match? A bridge? A puzzle? A storm? How would your metaphor play out in your mind? Your conflict metaphor, whether it is positive or negative, shapes the way you approach conflict.

Your perception is your reality, and you have the ability to adjust it. Once your conflict metaphor is defined, ask yourself if this is how you want conflict to function in your life. Is this what you want as your reality? Then accept, alter, or abandon this metaphor.

## **KNOW YOUR INTENT**

When walking into a tough situation or discussion, you need to understand your intent. Ask yourself, “What do I want to achieve in this conversation?” Just establishing this focus provides a framework you can use to determine whether a conversation has been successful. Did your outcome equal the intent? Were you effective?

Consider the number of conversations you have in a day and how many of those actually result in the desired outcome. Focusing on your intent provides a different filter for dialogue: Is it more important to achieve the outcome you have identified or to say what you might want to say, even if it is at odds with your intent? Think about how different your behavior will be when your dialogue is less about language and more about behavioral changes or outcomes.

## **SLOW DOWN KNEE-JERK REACTIONS**

Many people find that when they are driving fast and passing people on the highway, it is because they are good drivers. But when other people drive fast and pass us, it's because they are crazy. It makes sense to ask ourselves why we believe these things. Why am I good driver when it's convenient for me, and others are crazy? Introspection helps us understand how and why we act in a certain way. The fight or flight instinct is just that: instinct. Learning how to manage this behavior becomes a significant tool when approaching conflict.

The fight or flight response adapted as a means of survival; life was hard

for our early ancestors, and the ones who lived were the ones who figured out when to fight and when to run. Circumstances have changed greatly for most of us, but we still have the same knee-jerk reactions. The way this plays out in tense situations, when we are stressed or anxious, can cause a destructive form of conflict — we tend to shut down or be overly aggressive. But we have another option — managing our knee-jerk, fight or flight reactions.

The most common tool is the “count to ten” rule. A variation on this is something you might remember from the television show “The Honeymooners,” in which Ralph Kramden used the saying, “Pins and needles, needles and pins, a happy man is a man that grins.” The idea is to give yourself a moment to breathe deep and manage the fight or flight instinct. Having a clear understanding of your physiological responses as they are occurring is extremely helpful when slowing down knee-jerk reactions. Try to notice when you are getting stressed by acknowledging your body’s signals. Then you can identify your reactions and apply methods for managing them.

## CONCLUSIONS

We are in control of our approach to conflict; indeed, most people change their approach to conflict over their lifetime.<sup>3</sup> But adjusting the way we deal with conflict — changing our behavior — is not easy to do. We behave in certain ways because those behaviors have somehow worked for us in the past. Trying something different is nerve racking and difficult because

it requires us to take risks, but such changes can enhance our effectiveness at work and, in general, in our relationships with others.

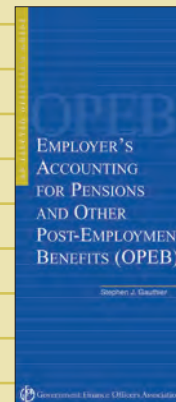
This article provides some actions you can take to change your style and competence when dealing with conflict. Identify your preferred style of dealing with conflict — determine whether you a competitor, collaborator, compromiser, avoider, or accommodator, and then challenge yourself to adapt your style to the situation. Analyze your personal conflict metaphor, practice identifying your intent prior to conversations, and slow down your knee-jerk reactions. These steps will help you to manage conflict in a way that improves your effectiveness at work and in every area of life. ■

### Notes

1. “Workplace Conflict and How Businesses Can Harness It to Thrive,” CPP Global Human Capital report, July 2008, available at [https://www.cpp.com/Pdfs/PP\\_Global\\_Human\\_Capital\\_Report\\_Workplace\\_Conflict.pdf](https://www.cpp.com/Pdfs/PP_Global_Human_Capital_Report_Workplace_Conflict.pdf).
2. Kenneth W. Thomas and Ralph H. Kilmann, *Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument* (Tuxedo, New York: Xicom, 1974), and Robert R. Blake and Jane Mouton, *The Managerial Grid: The Key to Leadership Excellence*. (Houston, Texas: Gulf Publishing Co., 1964).
3. CPP Global Human Capital report.

**BETH BRATKOVIC** has worked in the field of organization development and leadership development for 20 years. She is the founder of KIS Virtual Training Company, which offers facilitated leadership courses for all levels of management. Bratkovic earned her Master of Organization Development from the Center for Organization Development at Loyola University. She can be contacted at [Bratkovic@att.net](mailto:Bratkovic@att.net).

# ARE YOU READY?



An Elected Official's Guide:

**Employer's Accounting  
for Pensions and Other  
Post-Employment  
Benefits (OPEB)**

by Stephen J. Gauthier

A major challenge facing local governments is how to finance the cost of pensions and other post-employment benefits such as postretirement healthcare. While financial reports provide a wealth of information for making decisions, most decision makers find that information extremely difficult to understand and apply. This easy-to-understand and highly practical publication removes the mystery from pension and benefits accounting so that decision makers can confidently use the information contained in financial reports to make better decisions.

**To learn more and to purchase one book, a bundle, or the entire series, visit us online at [www.gfoa.org](http://www.gfoa.org).**

 **Government Finance  
Officers Association**

**Order online [www.gfoa.org](http://www.gfoa.org)**

**GFOA Publications**