

Constructive Conflict

Something Good Might Come Out of This

Some of us wish that conflict would go away, but think about it for a moment: have you ever experienced better results after the storm of disagreement? Isn't this better than pretending everything is okay when it's not? We want to resolve conflict, hoping we can get everyone to agree, but that doesn't always happen. So what do you do in a conflict situation when intelligent people disagree and they are both right? What if they are both wrong?

A good place to start is to take a look at what drives us to conflict. Abraham Maslow wrote about the human hierarchy of needs. He said that once basic needs are met we set them aside and higher level needs become the center of attention. The most basic need is survival. At this level we are totally self-centered, and we have good reason to be. We would do just about anything to meet our need for food, water, and shelter—even if it leads to conflict with other people. Once these basic physical needs are met, we operate at a higher level, meeting the needs of our family and community. Now, the conflict is between my group and another group.

In the workplace, you don't see people too worried about the basic needs for survival and security, but you do see the higher level need for achievement. At first, one might think that the achievement need would lead to cooperation. However, conflict occurs at this level because we each want to get the job done right and we all don't agree on what this means. The conflict can be intense because there is a great deal riding on it.

Conflict is part of living; it is neither good nor bad. The challenge is to make conflict constructive. In our workshop, *Thriving on Conflict*, we do an exercise that demonstrates unconstructive conflict that accomplishes nothing: two people face each other and the only thing they are allowed to say is, "I'm right." They repeat this phrase back and forth, and typically, they say it louder and with more passion. It's fun to watch and see what people learn from this. Talking louder with more emotion doesn't help; they get nowhere. This is typical of many unconstructive conflict situations: people get on the defensive and don't go anywhere positive.

We use an assessment from Human Synergistics^(T), called the *Lifestyles Inventory - Conflict*^(T), which allows people to see how they typically respond in a conflict situation. Responders fall into three categories:

- Constructive
- Passive/defensive
- Aggressive/defensive

Constructive responders view conflict as an opportunity to make things better, whereas the two defensive responders view conflict as threatening.

Constructive Conflict	
Defensive Conflict	
Aggressive	Passive

Constructive

There are four constructive approaches to conflict, and they all work.

Pragmatic: *Let's look at the facts and figure this thing out.*

Whatever the situation, pragmatists will ask, "What can be done?" They leave out the emotions and don't dwell on the past, saying things like, "Why did you mess this up?" They want the facts and are willing to let the facts lead where they lead, and they will accept any idea that works, whether it is theirs or their opponent's.

Self-Empowered: *Here is what I am doing about it.*

Self-empowered people take ownership and responsibility. They don't cast blame on others; they start by working on things they control. These people do not see themselves as powerless victims. Rather, they see a crisis as a challenge and an opportunity, and typically, they find solutions that no one thought were even possible.

Relationship Builder: *First, let's get to know each other.*

Before dealing with the issues leading to conflict, these people want to deal with the person; they want to make a human connection. On Monday morning when they get to work, they are likely to ask, "How was your weekend?" For them, this is a genuine question; they really want to know. They know from past experience that a human connection can get them through the tough times.

Conciliator: *I know we can work this out.*

The conciliator's number one belief is the old expression "win/win." Their first move is to figure out how the other person can win: if I can help you get what you want, you will help me with what I want. This is not to be confused with lose/win, where I give in to you to make you happy at my expense. It is critical to the conciliator that both parties walk away from the conflict feeling that their needs were met.

In summary, all four of these approaches allow you to view conflict as an opportunity. The *pragmatic* and *self-empowered* approaches create new ideas, breakthroughs, and success where you have not seen it before. People who use the *relationship builder* and *conciliator* approaches often improve relationships by connecting with others and having meaningful conversation that leads to success.

Passive/Defensive

The four passive/defensive approaches build a protective barrier.

Avoider: *Time heals all wounds.*

Avoiders figure that if you wait it out, the problem will go away. The problem is that time does not heal all wounds; some wounds become infected. In moderation, avoidance is a useful strategy, but if you avoid every conflict, fear and resentment can build because you are not doing anything to address the underlying problems. If you find yourself in this category, we suggest that you take another look at the constructive *self-empowered* style. If you speak the language of personal responsibility, you start believing in your abilities and stop being the victim.

Accommodator: *I lose and you win so you will like me.*

Accommodators have a strategy of winning by losing so that others will like them. To a limited extent, this works very well: accommodators are liked, but, unfortunately, they are not always respected, and by giving in too easily and not taking a stand, they miss opportunities. The difference between the *accommodator* and the *relationship builder* is the latter has learned that you don't have to lose to be liked. If you find yourself accommodating to your own detriment, continue to use your great human relations skills, but don't always give in; support your side of the issue. Whether you win or not, you will walk away with the satisfaction of having been heard. Don't be surprised if you win more than you thought you would.

Regulator: *If we do it for you, we will have to do it for everyone.*

The rules are the regulator's defense, and to the regulator, the rules are more important than the results. Rules were written for a reason, but there is the letter of the law and the spirit of the law. If you hide behind the letter of the law, you become rigid and rules can actually work against you. What happens when you have to take action and there are no rules? Are you going to just sit there? We suggest instead that you take a look at the constructive *pragmatic* style.

Insulator: *The way my boss feels about it...*

The insulator finds a base of power and hides behind it. It's like having a bodyguard. The problem is that insulators often become groupies rather than developing their own skills, and if the bodyguard leaves, they are lost. They show great loyalty to the powerful person, but it's not always a two-way relationship. Insulators are at risk of becoming the proverbial "yes man", and they are easily replaced when their base of power moves on. If you are in this category, take another look at the *self-empowered* constructive style, and start speaking for yourself.

As a general observation, when a passive/defensive person wants to improve, there is a knee-jerk reaction to do exactly the opposite. For example, a person who is quiet at meetings might try speaking loudly and banging on the table. Here is a warning: the aggressive/defensive styles don't work that well either.

Aggressive/Defensive

The four aggressive/defensive approaches use a preemptive attack.

Dominator: *Do it my way.*

When dominators enter the room and join the meeting, they try to take control. Right or wrong, they know where they are going, and they expect you to follow. They are on the offensive, believing that this defends them from other approaches that would cause them to fail. They have a need either to control others or to do it themselves; power is important, and they will work hard

to get it. We have a suggestion for the dominator: look at the constructive *relationship builder* approach. By showing some genuine interest in the other person, you will soften the effect of your aggressive approach. Furthermore, you may find people more willing to follow your lead because of the supportive way you treat them.

Escalator: *When I throw a tantrum, I get what I want.*

No matter what happens, the escalator's first reaction is to get upset; whatever the conflict level, they raise the intensity several notches. To make themselves look good, they attack other people, but unfortunately, this is self-defeating. If you are an escalator, we suggest you look to the *conciliator* for an example of a constructive approach. Understand that most people are well-intentioned, and find a way to see a positive aspect to your opponent's position. Sure, there may be bad intentions, too, but if you focus on the other person's viewpoint and interest, you are more likely to have positive results.

Competitor: *I win, you lose.*

The competitor is the exact opposite of the *accommodator*—he or she sees winning as an opportunity to be respected and liked. The problem with both the *accommodator* and the *competitor* is a matter of degree; little competition and a little accommodation can be good things. With the competitor, though, things can get out of hand when winning becomes the only goal, and other people may be torn down. Remember, our goal is to get work done, and when other people are invalidated nothing gets accomplished. The key is to keep competition fun, uplifting, and a way for us to improve skills. We recommend that the competitor become more *pragmatic* and look instead at what you are trying to accomplish; don't equate your importance only with winning.

Perfectionist: *It isn't good enough.*

The first thing to recognize about perfectionists is that they are great people to have on the team because they do things well. There is nothing wrong with wanting to do things right, unless it gets out of hand. If a client doesn't want perfection, taking more time to perfect every single item delays the project and may even cause it to be abandoned because it never gets done. Another problem is the effect that perfectionism has on the team: if you focus only on what is wrong, you risk de-energizing other people. People can lose interest, and then you end up having to do it all yourself. We suggest a more *pragmatic* approach. Establish a point at which the work is acceptable, and look at what you were trying to accomplish in the first place. Perfect the things that need perfecting, and ease off on the rest.

Let's pull all of this together. When you get up in the morning, you know that there is going to be conflict today. You have a choice; you can be constructive or defensive. We all learned our defensive approaches years ago, and they actually work at protecting us, which is why we often jump to them when we face conflict. To have positive results, however, there are better choices:

- **Pragmatic:** *Let's look at the facts and figure this thing out.*
- **Self-Empowered:** *Here is what I am doing about it.*
- **Relationship Builder:** *First, let's get to know each other.*
- **Conciliator:** *I know we can work this out.*

We conclude our workshop, *Thriving on Conflict*, with a graduation exercise. This exercise provides an opportunity to try constructive conflict styles that may be a little foreign to each person. It's fun to watch dominators play a supportive role to people who have been reluctant to put forth ideas. We have seen competitors accommodate others, and accommodators become just a bit more competitive and speak up for themselves. The point of the exercise is to practice new approaches so that in the real world they become natural.

There is no magic wand to prevent conflict, but we have four constructive approaches that work. Remember, with constructive conflict, something good might come out of this.

Constructive Conflict	
Pragmatist Self-empowered Conciliator Relationship Builder	
Defensive Conflict	
Aggressive Perfectionist Competitor Dominator Escalator	Passive Avoider Insulator Regulator Accommodator

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