

Conflict Management--Style and Strategy



In a Nutshell

It's important to remember that there are many strategies we can use in conflict situations, but each of us tends to habitually use some strategies more often than others. To most effectively resolve a conflict, we should use the strategy that is most appropriate for that particular conflict situation. However, that strategy might not be the strategy that we habitually use.

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The Wrong Strategy for Shaun Williams

How often do we make the mistake that Shaun Williams (celebrating in the photo above) made on Sunday; i.e., responding to a conflict situation the way we *feel* like responding rather than the way we *should* respond? The incident occurred at the end of a very close game--a time when his team could not afford any penalties. When tempers flared between one of Williams' teammates and an opponent, Williams ran across the field and began to fight. Predictably, his team was penalized and he was ejected. The penalty was very unfortunate as his team, the Giants, narrowly lost the game. The loss brought their season to an end. Williams' poor choice of a conflict management strategy was a giant blunder.

To manage conflict well, we have to remember that there are several conflict management strategies. The key to managing conflict well is choosing and executing the strategy that best fits the situation.

Conflict Management Strategies

There is a menu of strategies we can choose from when in conflict situations:

- **Forcing** - using formal authority or other power that you possess to satisfy your concerns without regard to the concerns of the party that you are in conflict with.
- **Accommodating** - allowing the other party to satisfy their concerns while neglecting your own.
- **Avoiding** - not paying attention to the conflict and not taking any action to resolve it.
- **Compromising** - attempting to resolve a conflict by identifying a solution that is partially satisfactory to both parties, but completely satisfactory to neither.
- **Collaborating** - cooperating with the other party to understand their concerns and expressing your own concerns in an effort to find a mutually and completely satisfactory solution (win-win).

Research on conflict management styles has found that each of us tends to use one or two of the above five strategies more than the others. For instance, some people predominantly use collaborating when in

interpersonal conflict situations. In other words, although there are five different ways to handle conflicts, such as a person is more likely to collaborate than they are to force, accommodate, avoid, or compromise. There are many advantages to using a collaborating strategy to handle interpersonal conflict situations. Collaborating with the other party promotes creative problem solving, and it's a way of fostering mutual respect and rapport. However, collaborating takes time, and many conflict situations are either very urgent or too trivial to justify the time it takes to collaborate. There are many conflict situations that should be handled with one of the other four conflict management strategies rather than collaboration. Managers who are very skilled at conflict management are able to (a) understand interpersonal conflict situations and (b) use the appropriate conflict management strategy for each situation.

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Matching Strategies to Situations

There are a few key variables that define conflict management situations and determine which conflict management strategies are likely to be effective. **Time pressure** is an important variable--if there were never any time pressures, collaboration might always be the best approach to use. In addition to time pressures, some of the most important factors to consider are issue importance, relationship importance, and relative power:

- **Issue importance** - the extent to which important priorities, principles or values are involved in the conflict.
- **Relationship importance** - how important it is that you maintain a close, mutually supportive relationship with the other party.
- **Relative power** - how much power you have compared to how much power other party has.

When you find yourself in conflict over very important issues, you should normally try to collaborate with the other party. But, if time is precious and if you have enough power to impose your will, forcing is more appropriate. Realize that you might need to repair the relationship after using a forcing strategy if the other party feels that you did not show adequate consideration for their concerns. Again, collaborating is normally the best strategy for handling conflicts over important issues.

When dealing with moderately important issues, compromising can often lead to quick solutions. However, compromise does not completely satisfy either party, and compromise does not foster innovation the way that taking the time to collaborate can. So, collaborating is a better approach to dealing with very important issues.

When you find yourself in conflict over a fairly unimportant issue, using an accommodating strategy is a quick way to resolve the conflict without straining your relationship with the other party. Collaborating is also an option, but it might not be worth the time.

Avoiding should normally be reserved for situations where there is a clear advantage to waiting to resolve the conflict. Too often, interpersonal conflicts persist and even worsen if there is no attempt to resolve them. Avoiding is appropriate if you are too busy with more important concerns and if your relationship with the other party is unimportant. However, if either the issue or the relationship between the parties is important, then avoidance is a poor strategy.

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Photo Credit

AP Photo/Bernie Nunez: e-mailed to me from *Yahoo! News*, (www.news.yahoo.com)

Sources and Additional References

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About the Newsletter and Subscriptions

LeaderLetter is written by Dr. Scott Williams, Department of Management, [Raj Sooin College of Business](#), Wright State University, Dayton, Ohio. It is a supplement to my MBA 751 - Managing People in Organizations class. It is intended to reinforce the course concepts and maintain communication among my former MBA 751 students, but anyone is welcome to subscribe. In addition, subscribers are welcome to forward this newsletter to anyone who they believe would have an interest in it. To [subscribe](#), simply send an e-mail message to me requesting subscription. Of course, subscriptions to the newsletter are free. To [unsubscribe](#), e-mail a reply indicating that you would like to unsubscribe.

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A Good, Clean Joke

Kid Quotes

A three-year-old went with his dad to see a litter of kittens. On returning home, he breathlessly informed his mother there were 2 boy kittens and 2 girl kittens. "How did you know?" his mother asked. "Daddy picked them up and looked underneath," he replied, "I think it's printed on the bottom."

On the first day of school, the Kindergarten teacher said, "If anyone has to go to the bathroom, hold up two fingers." A little voice from the back of the room asked, "How will that help?"

A mother and her young son returned from the grocery store and began putting away the groceries. The boy opened the box of animal crackers and spread them all over the table. "What are you doing?" his mother asked. "The box says you can't eat them if the seal is broken," the boy explained. "I'm looking for the seal."

A father was reading Bible stories to his young son. He read, "The man named Lot was warned to take his wife and flee out of the city, but his wife looked back and was turned to salt." His son asked, "What happened to his flea?"

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