

Approaching Conflict with Tact and Maturity



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By Dr. Chance T. Eaton

You have been sitting in a meeting with your staff, weighing alternative solutions to a recent problem that has surfaced. The decision is an important one, but time is of the essence. Due to the time sensitivity, you recommend a particular solution, and nearly everyone agrees with it – except Allen. During the meeting, he isn't constructive and appears to be cynical to any recommended solutions. You feel your team is nearly all behind you, so you pull the trigger with the new solution.

Half an hour after the meeting you run into Allen in the hall and he says: "You know, your plan stinks, and I think you are being an incompetent fool for insisting on it. Go ahead and do it your way – that is what we always do around here anyway!"

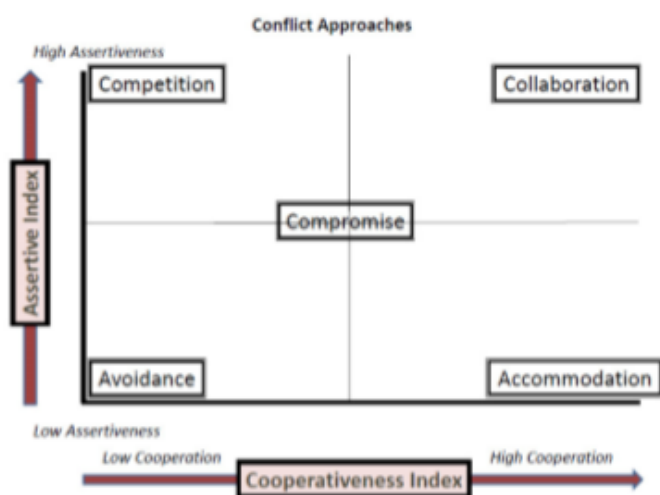
How do you handle this situation? Most managers I ask take an assertive position, advocating putting Allen in his place, likely with a step in progressive discipline. But is this the wisest approach? Conflict is very complex, and effective teams benefit from having

a basic knowledge of conflict management.

Conflict, by definition, is "an expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources and interferences from others in achieving their goals" (Wilmot & Hocker, 2001, p. 41). The truth is that conflict exists to some extent in all organizations and is a natural aspect of all social relationships (Snowden & Gorton, 2002). We must remember that conflict is normal and can sometimes be positive – especially when it causes us to explore new ideas, test positions and identify new solutions. Conflict is unhealthy when it damages the trust between two parties and leads to fight-flight-freeze responses.

The number one problem with conflict in the workplace isn't conflict in and of itself but that employees resort to their preferred conflict approaches and do not realize they have the ability to flex into alternative styles depending on the situation. By *living* in only one type of conflict mode, you are setting yourself up for even more conflict and team disengagement.

Figure 1



One of the most recognized conflict style models comes from Kenneth Thomas and Ralph Kilmann (1973) and is now a popular assessment published by Consulting Psychologists Press (assertiveness and cooperativeness dimensions (Figure 1). No one mode is better than another, but people have a tendency to favor certain modes over others. Here is a short description of each mode:

Avoidance: A low-assertive and low-cooperative conflict approach, it is passive and ignores conflict situations. The positives of this approach are that it can be used for trivial issues or a cooling-off period, has little chance of changing something and needs more information before a decision is made. The negative of this approach is that it can lead to further stress and conflict due to the lack of action.

This mode can be delivered in different ways. You can shut down, say "I don't want to deal with this!" and storm out of a room, or you can say "I need more time to think about this. I'm not ready to make a decision or provide an opinion right now."

Competition: A high-assertive and low-cooperative conflict approach. The positive of this approach is that it is appropriate when decisive action or a change is needed. The negative of this approach is that it may be limited to one party attempting to beat another party, leading to hostile and destructive communication.

This mode can be delivered in different ways. You can bully, push people over and throw things across the room until you get what you want, or you can say "Hear me out. I have good evidence to show that this is a good approach, and if you give it a little time, I hope you can see why I think this is such an important solution."

Accommodation: A low-assertive and high-cooperative conflict approach. The positives of this approach are

that it can lead to harmony in the relationship and build social deposits in trust accounts and is non-directive because others can be influential in the situation. The negative of this approach is that a person may sacrifice their own values to maintain harmonious relationships and, in extreme situations, lose their own identity because they are in the business of serving others over themselves.

This mode can be delivered in different ways. You can serve everyone else to the point where you become a "doormat" to others, or you can choose to help those around you form harmony because the team is more important in this situation than your own personal needs.

Compromise: A moderately assertive and moderately cooperative conflict approach. The positives of this approach are that it forces an equal balance between the parties and quick solutions can result from the settlement of a complex situation. The negatives of this approach are that it may not go far enough in resolving the conflict and may appear as "let's make a deal" gamesmanship.

This mode can be delivered in different ways. You can create a cynical climate of gamesmanship, losing sight of the larger issue by focusing on strategy and tactics, or you can see that the best solution at the current moment is to argue for what you need but be willing to concede on some needs so that you can move forward as a team.

Collaboration: A high-assertive and high-cooperative conflict approach. The positives of this approach are that all parties win and communication is positive, leading to strengthened relationships, everyone being heard and, most important, new solutions never imagined before coming to light. The negative of this approach is that it is the most difficult to achieve because it requires great effort and time from all the involved parties.

This mode can be delivered in different ways. You can spend too much time looking for collaboration on insignificant issues and unnecessarily slow down the speed of business, or you can use collaboration as an approach to all conflict, seeking creativity and appreciating the diversity of opinion, with the goal in mind to be synergistic in creating solutions.

Since the model is behavioral in nature, it can change and is situation specific. For example, when I take the TKI from a home perspective, I score high in the normative database for Accommodating, but when I take it from a work perspective (working with a specific group of people), I score high in Competing. Your styles

can change from day to day, situation to situation. The art of conflict management is to know your preferred approaches and learn to flex to the situation.

Back to the original work situation I posed. What is the appropriate response to the employee Allen who inappropriately lashed out to you regarding a decision? When I train in this subject and pose this particular scenario, I typically hear students use a variety of conflict approaches. For example, they often say to start a small dose of *assertiveness*: "This is not a professional conversation, and I will schedule us a meeting time today to understand in greater detail." By scheduling a meeting time, you have introduced some temporary *avoidance*, giving the employee an opportunity to cool down. If someone is already in an amygdala hijack, nothing constructive can come from the conversation, and you are likely to also move into an amygdala hijack, making the situation even worse. In the follow-up meeting, you may ask questions to understand why Allen was so upset about the decision, exploring his perspective in greater detail. This is a temporary *accommodating* mode. The conversation can go lots of ways from here – maybe Allen discloses a major personal challenge, like feelings of being unheard or recognized, or maybe he has been humiliated by the other employees and can't go along with anyone's decisions on the team. Without a doubt, *assertiveness* will come back up as you tell Allen that such outbursts are inappropriate in a professional work environment – perhaps providing a written warning in some cases. We can play this small conversation out lots of ways, but the point is that highly effective employees and leaders become comfortable flexing into multiple conflict modes.

Conflict is very complex, and I can attest that poorly managed communication around conflict can create hell for a team. When the modes are understood and practiced effectively, teams can learn to approach difficult situations with tact and maturity, resulting in greater trust and team engagement.

Kilmann, R. H., & Thomas, K. W. (1977). "Developing a force-choice measure for conflict-handling behavior: the mode instrument." *Educational & Psychological Measurement*, 37, 2, p. 309-325.

Snowden, P. E., & Gorton, R. A. (2002). *School Leadership and Administration* (6th ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.

Wilmot, W., & Hocker, J. (2001). *Interpersonal Conflict*. Boston: McGraw-Hill.

Dr. Chance Eaton has over a decade's worth of experience working in the field of learning and organizational development. Due to his unique educational and work experiences in finance, psychology, leadership and management, education, noetic sciences and agriculture, Dr. Eaton provides his clients with relevant business solutions grounded in theory and research. To learn more about Dr. Eaton's services, visit HR-SolutionsInternational.com.

