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The 12-minute MBA

CHAPTER 4 — **Conflict Resolution**, By Charles Johnson *With Andy Thibault*

CONFLICT IS A PART OF HUMAN nature and certainly a part of American history. When you are the leader of a team or an organization, resolving conflict quickly becomes a very important skill.

In fact, conflict has an economic impact on companies. The American Management Association has identified that middle managers in corporate America spend about 20 percent of their time resolving conflict. That's about one day a week.

Say your company has about 100 middle managers earning \$80,000 per year, that's \$8 million per year in budgeted cost. The cost, if 20 percent of the time is spent in conflict, is \$1.6 million on that line item alone. I think we'd all agree you'd rather have an extra day a week to do productive things; or an extra \$1.6 million-plus to spend more wisely.

As you move up in an organization, you can spend even more time resolving conflict. When I was Vice President of Sales at U.S. Surgical, I spent 80 percent of my time resolving conflict, within the organization or outside the organization. It becomes very frustrating for a leader to spend most of his time in the middle of other peoples' arguments. Let's look at a typical day:

- ✦ **Your two sons are fighting over a toy or if older, who's going to use the car.**
- ✦ **Your daughter and wife are arguing over what your daughter is wearing to school.**
You are probably at work already, but you get a page from your wife, exasperated over the kids, and your response is "Just deal with it." OK, you may have avoided the argument, but now your spouse is angry with you and I guarantee you will pay later, and you know it.
- ✦ **At the hospital, there's a disagreement between two residents.**
- ✦ **The O.R. director has just bumped one of your cases.**
- ✦ **A patient ate that morning.**
- ✦ **Your colleagues are deeply engaged in a battle for a new piece of equipment for the O.R.**
- ✦ **Your book chapter is due and the staff who were told to edit and clean it up, just ignored your request.**
- ✦ **Your office calls with a complaint that two insurance claims have been denied and you have to call the company to argue your case.**
- ✦ **Your lawyer calls about a pending malpractice claim.**
- ✦ **Your secretary gets into it with your department chairman's secretary and is threatening to quit.**

After a long day of surgeries, intervening into your conflict engagements, you return home where the same arguments from this morning await you only now your spouse is also angry at you for your comment, "Just deal with it."

OK, I bet you're thinking that this was nothing. You deal with five or ten times that amount of conflict each and every day. And you are probably right.

So you are probably thinking, so what, conflict is a part of every organization and every profession. That's true, yet there are strategies and methods for dealing with conflict that can have a very positive effect. In fact, when people begin to understand how they act in conflict situations, see alternative positions, and work toward collaborating or creating win-wins, that conflict, which is generally non-productive, can become both productive and constructive.

Kenneth Thomas and Ralph Kilmann, of UCLA and the University of Pittsburgh, respectively, have studied the area of conflict. They have created, in my experience, one of the best tools for understanding the nature of conflict and the roles people play in a conflict situation. In fact, their model has been used for years to teach people in organizations about dealing with conflict.

Their model allows individuals to identify their own conflict modes and that of others within the organization, and take a minute to think about the value and cost of a conflict before they charge in to engage:

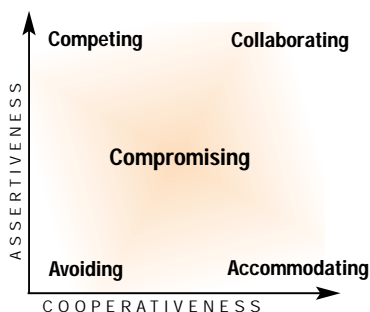
Conflict is defined as any situation where your concerns or desires differ from another's. It can manifest itself as a difference of opinion to a heated argument. The difference depends on the importance of the issue and the amount of energy you put into achieving your goals.

There are five basic modes that humans take in a conflict. Each of these modes is really based on two very simple issues:

1. Assertiveness: *The degree to which one seeks to satisfy his or her own concerns.*
2. Cooperativeness: *The degree to which one is willing to satisfy the needs of the other person.*

Five Modes for Handling Conflict

Your Conflict Mode = Skill + Situation



If we put assertiveness and cooperativeness on an x/y axis, we can begin to define the five conflict modes. Now it is equally important to understand there are two forces that define the conflict mode you choose: skill and situation.

Skill refers to your perceived ability to succeed at the chosen conflict. If for example you find yourself in a conflict with someone who has superior debating skills or perhaps superior size, strength, and speed (obviously this would be a conflict taken to the extreme), you may choose a different mode than your tendency.

Also, the situation may dictate your mode. If you are in a debate with your boss, you probably will take a different mode than if you were in the same debate with a peer.

The key rule to remember is there is no one mode that is correct, it is situational. The truly successful conflict handler is the one who chooses the correct mode for his or her skills

and in the correct situation.

Understanding yourself is important, but through understanding all the conflict modes, you are better prepared to handle conflicts that are occurring in your family, your organization, or with your subordinates. In fact, the great thing about understanding the conflict modes is you have plenty of opportunities to observe others and identify which modes are used correctly or incorrectly.

Let's look at the five conflict modes. If we look at our x/y axis, we see the first mode as being high in assertiveness and low in cooperativeness. This mode we call Competing. It is really, my way or the highway. People who are high competitors are quick to engage in any and all conflicts. This mode does have some very positive applications:

- In emergencies, where quick decisive action is necessary.
- In important issues where unpopular courses of action need implementation.
- In issues that are vital for organizational welfare and you know you are right.
- To protect yourself from people who try to take advantage of your good nature.

The problem with high competitors is they are often surrounded by 'yes' people, because the people have learned it is dangerous to disagree with them. Subordinates may lack an opportunity to develop by asking the appropriate questions and offering possible suggestions that are divergent from the leaders.

Also, think about the people you want around you. Isn't it frustrating when you're engaged with a high competitor who wants to take every issue and everything you say to the mat?

The next mode we'll examine is the Avoider. This person is both low on assertiveness and low on cooperativeness. A wimp you might say. Yet avoidance is a successful mode in a variety of situations:

- When an issue is trivial, or there are more important issues to deal with.
- When you perceive no chance of satisfying your concerns.
- When the potential damage of conflict outweighs the benefits of resolution.
- To let people cool down.
- When you need to gather more information.
- When others can resolve the conflict more effectively.

Overuse of avoidance might make you appear to be weak or lacking an opinion. If you underuse this mode, you find yourself involved in even the most trivial issues. Knowing when to avoid a conflict gives you tremendous power and allows you to deal with the truly important issues.

Next, we'll deal with the mode of Accommodating. Here we see a high amount of cooperativeness and a low amount of Assertiveness.

The Accommodator is a good role for the following situations:

- When you realize you are wrong.
- When the issue is more important to the other person.
- To build social credits for other issues—politicking.
- To preserve harmony.
- To allow subordinates to experiment and learn.

Overuse of Accommodating may result in others seeing you as a kiss-ass. It can deprive you of influence. When you don't use accommodating behaviors you may have trouble building goodwill with others. Others may regard you as self-serving and unreasonable. People may think you don't know when to give up.

Now let's talk about the remaining two conflict styles. First there is the style of Compromising. Compromising does have some advantages:

- When goals are moderately important but not worth the effort to fight.
- When two powers of equal importance are committed to exclusive goals.
- To achieve temporary settlements to complex issues.
- To arrive at expedient solutions under time pressure.
- As a back-up mode when collaboration or competition fails.

The overuse of compromising may cause you to overlook the larger issues. The process of bargaining and trading creates a political-like environment of government where every position is balanced by giving up some power. Conversely, the lack of use of well-planned and placed compromise may leave large and important issues unsettled.

The final conflict mode is Collaborating. This is where there is equally strong assertiveness and cooperativeness. It is the ultimate

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win-win negotiation. It is an important position in the following situations:

- **Finding an integrative solution when both sets of concerns are too important to be compromised.**
- **When your objective is to learn.**
- **To merge insights from people with different perspectives on a problem.**
- **To gain commitment by incorporating others' concerns into a consensual decision.**
- **To work through hard feelings of disparate parties.**

The overuse of collaborating behavior may actually limit the number of issues that can be resolved. Collaboration takes a lot of work and a commitment on both sides of the issue to work toward win-wins.

The lack of initiative in creating collaborative conclusions may cause the best solution to be missed. Win-wins are important when dealing with big important issues where there are conflicting positions.

Now I hope you see that there is no one style or position to take in a conflict situation. It is important to take a moment and evaluate the importance of the issue. Next, take a moment and evaluate the style that the other person has taken in the issue. Once you understand your competitor's styles, you can evaluate the smartest and most practical position to take in regards to the issue.

As a leader, it is important to understand the role that conflict takes in your organization. Are the conflict situations beneficial to find the right solution to a problem, or are they obstacles to the fulfilling of your organization's goals and objectives.

The reduction of unproductive conflict in your organization should be the goal of the leader, yet it is important for divergent opinions and positions to be expressed and explored. It must be the leader's goal to evaluate the amount of conflict in your organization and do something to assure that it is not crippling your organizational progress.

At times, a leader must choose to take a conflict style that adds to productivity. Alfred Sloan, who brought General Motors to supremacy over Ford, used conflict to challenge and alter prevailing wisdom and prevent the creation of stagnant thinking in his organization. Therefore, the lesson of this session is that conflict is both a good and bad thing. It is the leader's responsibility to turn conflict into a positive.

As you reflect on how conflict resolution leads to greater productivity, take the ideas and concepts I've discussed, do something to put them into action. The Thomas-Kilmann instrument is available on line at www.mbti.com and there are many organizational consultants who can come in and conduct a half-day session on conflict.

Through these sessions all the members of your team will learn about themselves and their peers and team members. Remember, the engagement and resolution of conflict is not intuitive. Just because you are an intelligent person doesn't mean you have the skill to understand and resolve conflict. This skill, as Steven Covey says, is "common sense but not common practice." In my experience, great leaders identify what they don't know and bring it into their organizations. It is your responsibility as a leader to diagnose what your organization needs and provide it for them.

Now you probably are waiting for me to tell you how to deal with conflict at home. Here, I can tell you I have only found two things that work. Avoid all conflicts at home and if that fails, add the sixth and less known style of conflict resolution: Beg for mercy.

You have to ask yourself how much time you spend resolving conflict—either at work or at home. Parents can spend a lot of time resolving conflicts between children, between children and other parent and, of course, between spouses. No one enjoys that, but we do it all the time.

Conflict will occur during the performance of a team. You do not want that con-

flict to cripple the team. Some conflict can be good, because we learn from discomfort.

We learn to hunt because we are hungry. We learn to write because we have to store ideas. We learn to learn to speak because we have to communicate.

A little conflict in a team, placed strategically and resolved, is very fortifying to a team. It shows them they can confront challenges and overcome them. It's a real confidence builder.

How a leader deals with conflict is very important. You can't ever have a team that does not face conflict. You don't want a team that is always in conflict; but you want to engage in a little bit of conflict at strategic points to allow the team to grow and develop.

Conflict resolution is important in both business and families. It sets the table for greater productivity all around. It's something that can be learned. ■