

Coping with Conflict

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How to Cope with Conflict

There are a variety of strategies available for coping with conflict. Some of us are more comfortable with some of these strategies than with others, but we all can be better conflict managers if we develop skills to implement several strategies and adapt resolution strategies to suit the particular conflict situation. Johnson & Johnson (1994) describe five possible approaches to conflict management: avoidance, accommodation, compromise, competition, and collaboration.

Approaches to Conflict Management

Avoidance

Avoidance occurs when an individual fails to address the conflict, but rather sidesteps, postpones, or simply withdraws. Some people attempt to avoid conflict by postponing it, hiding their feelings, changing the subject, leaving the room, or quitting the project.

Use avoidance when:

1. The stakes aren't that high and you don't have anything to lose.
2. You don't have time to deal with it.
3. The context isn't suitable to address the conflict - it isn't the right time or place.
4. More important issues are pressing.
5. You see no chance of getting your concerns met.
6. You would have to deal with an angry, hot headed person.
7. You are totally unprepared, taken by surprise, and you need time to think and collect information.
8. You are too emotionally involved and the others around you can solve the conflict more successfully.

Avoidance may not be appropriate when the issue is very important and postponing resolution will only make matters worse. Avoiding conflict is generally not satisfying to the individuals involved in a conflict, nor does it help the group resolve a problem.

Accommodation

Accommodation is the opposite of competition and contains an element of self sacrifice. An accommodating person neglects his or her own concerns to satisfy the concerns of the other person.

Accommodation is a convenient strategy for satisfying an immediate need for individuals or the group. It emphasizes the things conflicting parties have in common, de-emphasizes the differences, and helps groups review their common purpose in the midst of conflict.

Use accommodation when:

1. The issue is more important to the other person than it is to you.
2. You discover that you are wrong.
3. Continued competition would be detrimental and you know you can't win.
4. Preserving harmony without disruption is the most important consideration.

Accommodation should NOT be used if an important issue is at stake which needs to be addressed immediately.

Compromise

The objective of compromise is to find an expedient, mutually acceptable solution which partially satisfies both parties. It falls in the middle between competition and accommodation. Compromise gives up more than competition does, but less than accommodation. Compromise is appropriate when all parties are satisfied with getting part of what they want and are willing to be flexible. Compromise is mutual: all parties should receive something, and all parties should give something up.

Use compromise when:

1. The goals are moderately important but not worth the use of more assertive strategies.
2. People of equal status are equally committed.
3. You want to reach temporary settlement on complex issues.

4. You want to reach expedient solutions on important issues.
5. You need a back up mode when competition or collaboration doesn't work.

Compromise doesn't work when initial demands are too great from the beginning and there is no commitment to honor the compromise.

Competition

An individual who employs the competition strategy pursues his or her own concerns at the other person's expense. This is a power oriented strategy used in situations in which eventually someone wins and someone loses. Competition enables one party to win. Before using competition as a conflict resolution strategy, you must decide whether or not winning this conflict is beneficial to individuals or the group.

Use competition when:

1. You know you are right.
2. You need a quick decision.
3. You meet a steamroller type of person and you need to stand up for your own rights.

Competition will not enhance a group's ability to work together. It reduces cooperation.

Collaboration

Collaboration is the opposite of avoidance. It is characterized by an attempt to work with the other person to find some solution which fully satisfies the concerns of both. This strategy requires you to identify the underlying concerns of the two individuals in conflict and find an alternative which meets both sets of concerns. This strategy encourages teamwork and cooperation within a group. Collaboration does not create winners and losers and does not presuppose power over others. The best decisions are made by collaboration.

Use collaboration when:

1. Others' lives are involved.
2. You don't want to have full responsibility.
3. There is a high level of trust.
4. You want to gain commitment from others.
5. You need to work through hard feelings, animosity, etc.

Collaboration may not be the best strategy to use if time is limited and people must act before they can work through their conflict, or there is not enough trust, respect or communication among the group for collaboration to occur.

For more information, please search for the following resources on PIG:

PIG Answers:

- Employee Conflict

References:

- Swan, M. Resolving Conflict with Employees in Swine Production. Fact Sheet 03.05.01. Pork Information Gateway; 2006.
- Johnson, D. & Johnson, F. (1994). Joining together group theory and group skills. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.