Five Conflict Styles Framework

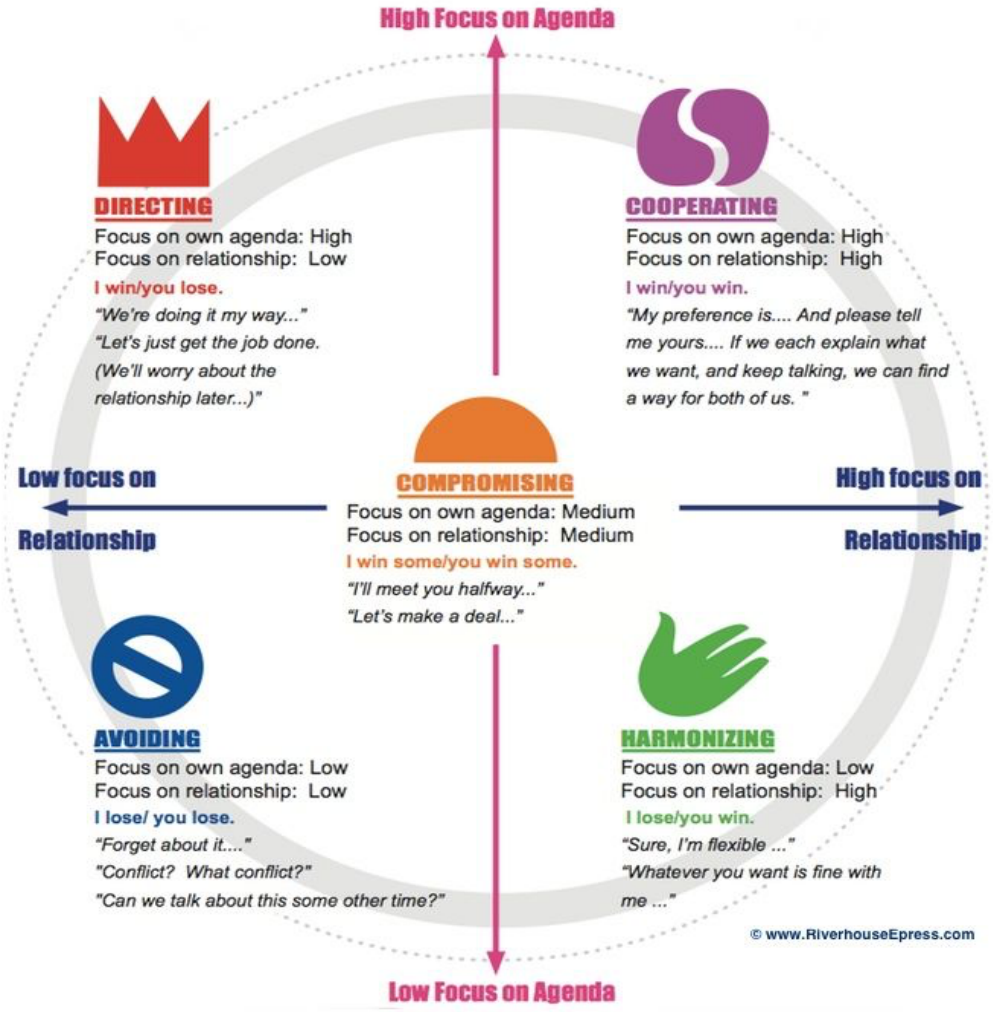
It is natural and to be expected that disagreements will arise between individuals and across groups. Disagreements can be a healthy demonstration of diverse understandings, opinions, worldviews, and value systems at play; effectively managing those disagreements can help identify unseen problems and lead to better knowledge, collaboration, and solutions. For example, disagreements in opinion can lead to more thought-out or innovative solutions and strategies and open us to diverse perspectives that we may not have considered. Supporting healthy conflict is also a powerful way to challenge the white supremacy trait of conflict avoidance. This form of conflict avoidance prioritizes collegiality, assimilation, and the comfort of the members of the dominant group in the organization rather than inviting diverse or minority voices, helpful challenges, and pathways for substantive change.

When healthy conflict is not supported, disagreements can bloom into unproductive conflict, potentially becoming intractable, impairing communication, harming morale, derailing collaboration, and keeping your organization from meeting your goals.

This resource draws from the work of peacebuilding advisor, facilitator, and scholar Ron Kraybill, and adds considerations for the way social identities and positional power shape our experiences of conflict. To learn more about his model and to take his conflict style assessment, visit www.conflictstylematters.com.

Kraybill identifies 5 common conflict styles; **all conflict styles have advantages and disadvantages**, and he recommends developing familiarity with all of them in order to navigate diverse situations. He maps these styles across two axes in a grid: Focus on Relationship and Focus on Own Agenda. Each of the conflict styles reflects a quadrant on the grid, with one in the center. **Fluency in conflict styles will not lead to a solution for all disagreements, but it can help improve your experiences of conflict and ability to act effectively.**

Five Styles of Responding to Conflict



It is essential to also reflect on individual social identities and organizational positions when assessing conflict styles and the root causes for conflict.

Avoiding seeks to minimize disagreement or fails to identify it altogether. It is characterized by *withdrawal, delay, denial,* and *avoiding response*. This can look like suppressing emotions, diverting focus elsewhere, being inaccessible or unreadable. As a conflict style, it preserves the status quo since it avoids addressing a need for change.

+ Avoiding can keep insignificant problems or relationships from taking up time and resources, and allows you to block others without active effort.
- Avoiding can slowly destroy relationships, lead to explosive outbursts when the source for disagreement is not addressed, and create stagnation, loss of engagement, and no accountability.

For someone with a marginalized social identity and/or low positional power, avoiding

- can keep them from garnering increased scrutiny or surveillance, especially if there is low diversity at the organization and they already feel highly exposed and tokenized
- can be part of a broader strategy of "managing up" by seeking workarounds, increased autonomy, and opportunities to tacitly mitigate the conflict
- can be an act of self-preservation through detachment in a harmful work environment

If you find yourself regularly defaulting to the avoiding style:

- Understand why you want to avoid the conflict,
- Reflect on your goals and relationship in the context of this conflict, and determine if this style is supportive,
- Proactively or directly addressing conflict may feel "too confrontational" from your default avoiding; however, if you are acting without anger and use tactful, constructive language, you are more likely to get positive results and be seen as a problem solver.

Harmonizing accommodates the other party and strives for agreeability. It is characterized by *agreeing, acknowledging error,* and *placating*. It can feel like assimilation, taking one for the team, or putting your needs last. This style may be most successful when you are in a low-power situation or the conflict is a low priority for you but high priority for the other person. As a conflict style, it prioritizes the relationship at the expense of one's own agenda.

+ Harmonizing demonstrates flexibility and collegiality.
- Harmonizing can lead to feelings of frustration that one's needs or goals aren't being met, low opportunities for growth through confrontation, devaluation of your contributions, and can protect unhealthy patterns or habits that should be challenged and changed.

For someone with a marginalized social identity and/or low positional power, harmonizing

- can contribute to expectations of "over-performing" to demonstrate their value compared to similarly positioned peers
- can be a way to challenge problematic stereotypes and bias by not wanting to appear "difficult," "uppity," "dramatic," or "overly sensitive"
- can be misinterpreted as lack of decisiveness in organizations that value "authoritative" leadership models

If you find yourself regularly defaulting to the harmonizing style:

- Work on openly sharing your feelings, giving feedback, and concerns with others,
- Develop your ability to delegate reasonable tasks using clear directions,
- Recognize that having your needs or goals met does not necessarily harm the relationship.

Cooperating attempts to meet the needs of all parties by developing solutions collaboratively. It *welcomes differences and strives to gain a fuller understanding to create solutions.* This style centers respect in the relationship and the value of all agendas among the disagreeing parties.

+ Cooperating can promote trust, creativity, and personal growth.
- Cooperating can lead to "too much processing" that eats up precious time, distract from more important tasks/issues, and cause disenchantment when no solutions are created.

For someone with a marginalized social identity and/or low positional power, cooperating

- can be a tactic to strategically disperse responsibility and expectations for resolutions, especially when the person has felt targeted, isolated, or actively misunderstood in the past
- can draw focus or shine a light on challenges that others have actively sought to minimize
- can feel like excessive emotional labor or pressure to participate in ways that satisfy others rather than meeting their own needs

If you find yourself regularly defaulting to the cooperating style:

- Confirm that the other parties want to engage or provide input; high-trust relationships often don't require extensive input,
- Prioritize cooperation when others have the information you need for the best solution; buy-in will be needed to effectively implement the decision; when there is likely to be push-back; when you consciously want to deepen or repair a relationship.

Directing prioritizes your own agenda above all else. It looks like *citing policy, demanding control, discouraging challenges*, and even *attacking dissent*. Directing is often associated with wielding power, controlling resources, or being able to impose consequences. It implies that there is just one pathway for a solution.

\+ Directing allows for quick action that can protect important things. It is especially helpful when there is a useful protocol that is being ignored, in emergencies when there is no time to negotiate, or when there is highly trusted leadership.

\- Directing can lead to resentment, loss of cooperation and trust, the inability for others to express their talents and contribute, and fewer opportunities for individual growth since challengers aren't seriously engaged.

For someone with a marginalized social identity and/or low positional power, directing

- Can express self-protection and/or frustration through assertion and truth telling when that person's recommendations, perspective, or experiences have been minimized
- Can often be mis-read as being "aggressive" or "angry" without active bias mitigation

If you find yourself regularly defaulting to the directing style:

- Challenge yourself to adopt the other party's perspective and to expand your vision of what solutions can include,
- Question the urgency that may be inspiring your directing style; though the conflict may feel urgent and require decisive immediate action, reconsider it in the context of your broader goals, relationships, and strategy,
- If directing seems the best path forward and you are in positional power, be explicit that this is the case rather than pretending to engage in collaboration or compromise.

Compromising prioritizes negotiating with a focus on fairness in order to address disagreement. It looks like *meeting halfway* or *bargaining.* It is especially useful when each party is clear about their interests and flexible about their positions.

\+ Compromising can find solutions relatively quickly. Successful compromising help builds the basis for cooperation.

\- Compromising can lead to unsatisfactory solutions that address symptoms but not causes, half measures, unprincipled agreements, and missed opportunities to devote necessary time for deeper discussion and understanding.

For someone with a marginalized social identity and/or low positional power, compromising

- may feel unsatisfying but offers a strategic gain
- could draw accusations by others in your identity group as "selling out"

If you find yourself regularly defaulting to the compromising style:

- Consider the ways might your sense of "fairness" may be limited or preventing you from considering even better solutions,
- Reflect on the ways compromising can encourage other parties to play games (start "high" versus asking authentically for what they need and want); look for opportunities for joint gains that a more cooperative style could help unearth.

It may be tempting to assume that cooperation is the "best" conflict style, but not all relationships or disagreements require deep investment or collaborative solutions. Every conflict represents an opportunity for parties to consciously articulate their objectives and goals; managing conflict productively means choosing the style that will best serve your goals. Sometimes your goals are the priority, and at other times the relationship is more important to preserve than your immediate objectives.

Assessing your conflict:[i]

- How important is this issue? Is this conflict systemic or situational? How soon is a solution needed?
- Do I have the information I need to fully understand the disagreement?
- What will happen if no action is taken, or a solution is delayed?
- Where is there passion for this issue (who cares the most about it)?
- Would a decision with input and expertise from others lead to a better process for a stronger solution? Whose voices, opinions, and experiences are missing or might have something to offer?
- Who will be affected by the outcome, and who is tasked with implementing the solution? How much buy-in is needed for a smooth resolution?
- Do I have the power or authority to make a unilateral decision? Do I have the social capital and trust to make a unilateral decision, especially if some are unhappy with the outcome?
- What are my conflict tendencies, and how might those be coloring my answers to these questions?

Choosing the best style for a conflict:

- Do you have low positional power in the dynamic? Is there no way for you to "win"? **Consider avoiding.**
- Do you need buy-in, especially among those who will be affected by the decision, in order to implement a solution? **Consider cooperating.**
- Do you need to make a decision quickly and decisively? **Consider directing**.
- Does the other party care passionately about the issue while it is not very significant for you? **Consider harmonizing**.
- Do you have limited time to come to a solution? Do you and the other party *have* to come to an agreement or understanding? **Consider compromising.**

[i] These reflection questions were modified from Susan S. Raines text *Conflict Management for Managers*: *Resolving Workplace, Client, and Policy Disputes.*