

Selecting Conflict Styles ©

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Our personal conflict styles are not adequate enough to comprehend conflict. The other party's style determines how persuasive one's conflict style can be and affect if the party can persist with his/her first choice of style. Attempting to solve a conflict simply by using our normal conflict style does not always translate in the real world as the conflict unfolds. We need to negotiate with sensitivity to the reactions that styles and tactics incite in others by using a style selection decision tree. In doing so, we will improve our outlook for making suitable choices regarding how best to approach and solve conflicts.

We need to understand the strategic features of choosing styles of interaction when managing conflicts. We also require good judgment in our selection as the wrong reaction can escalate the conflict instead of resolving it. Our goal should be to attempt to resolve the conflict as best as we can without affecting our own goals. As the conflict is in process, we should remain sensitive to the difficulties of changing styles and tactics in conflict interactions. This sensitivity should consider the importance of the problem to both parties involved, the significance of the relationship to us, trust in the other party, and the time constraints to find a resolution.

For instance, this week my co-worker Laura learned quickly the need to learn how to react to a situation by selecting the best choice for settling a conflict towards her desired way but remain prepared to resort to another style if deemed necessary. Our

directorship is being examined by our headquarters inspector general's (IG) office. One of our programs is in San Diego and is run by a contractor. Two months ago before this inspection started, Laura had told our local IG office that headquarters cannot inspect the San Diego site on the weekend since it is manned by only one person. This person will not be able to assist them since he has an important job to perform and cannot be taken away from his duties. They told her they would have it changed to the following Monday.

Laura discovered this week that nobody had changed any schedules to accommodate the contractor in San Diego. Back in February, the local IG had sent an email to another person in the office who is not familiar with that contract telling him that the original plan was still on. He did not understand the message but did not inform anyone else of the email. In work group settings, Laura's typical conflict style is accommodating because she tends to soothe the other party who is generally competitive in nature. Therefore, her initial reaction to this conflict was to withdraw and hope the inspectors would come to their senses once they realize the one person manning the site would be unhelpful to them during their inspection.

However, the conflict escalated because the local IG reported Laura to her leadership stating that she (Laura) was changing the headquarters IG schedule which leadership considers a violation of policy. This time Laura responded assertively because this issue was important to her and the IG. She understood the concern of her leadership and the local IG, but her own interests were important to her. She has more

knowledge about the contracting world than they do. She decided to remain firm in her response that they need to go to the site on Monday. Her strategy was to force them to listen and abide by her recommendation.

Realizing that she was not budging on her stance, the local IG tried to smooth things over with her by stating she could send representatives from our office to San Diego to meet with the IG and represent the contractor during the audit. They considered this response to be compromising but Laura did not concede. The contractor is paid to do a job and it not our responsibility to manage the program for them. This action would violate contract acquisition rules which states that all contracts are performance based. Laura does not trust the other party (the local IG) especially after he complained about her to senior leadership. She did not want them in control of the situation and she turned to protecting her power and contended her rivalry.

Laura knew that the time pressure was great. It was only a few days away until the weekend when the inspectors are supposed to show up. She had no time to collaborate with her opposing parties. She did not want to yield to them because she was fully intended on standing by her convictions. Avoiding the conflict would not solve the issue at the San Diego site. The local IG tried to collaborate and responded by saying they could demand that the contractor's management team needs to work on the weekend to accommodate the IG's schedule. Laura used the competing conflict style and pushed back. She reminded the local IG that they could not afford to pay the contractor to work the weekend. There was only funding for the one employee who

mans the operation on the weekend. They are legally obligated by government contract law to pay them to work on the weekend and that only a warranted contracting officer can direct a contractor to do something.

She has no grudges or hard feelings with the local IG person, and she does understand the importance of forming good long lasting working relationships. In such situations, she will use her typical accommodating conflict style. However, Laura has been seeking employment elsewhere and her loyalty to senior leadership and their counterparts has been waning. Needless to say, she has been overworked due to this inspection since it started one week ago. Laura's lack of sleep and anger over management has added to her newly founded competitive conflict style. She counters her conflicting party with a threat to report them to the Office of Communications & Congressional Liaison for fraud, waste and abuse since they are trying to misuse government funds to appease the inspectors. This threat abruptly ended the conflict as the local IG conceded to Laura's demands. Fraud, waste and abuse are not complaints that an IG person wants on their record and Laura knew it.

In conclusion, personal conflict styles are not the only ways to understand conflicts as they happen. As the example demonstrates, one's first choice of conflict style may not satisfy the situation. The other party's approach to conflict needs to be considered depending on how persuasive their approach is in their style and tactics. We need to take into account the importance of the issues to each other and how much the relationship is valued. We also need to consider how much time and pressure is

involved and whether we can trust the other party. If we reflect on these questions during the conflict, we should make the right decisions in choosing the appropriate strategies to resolve our conflicts.