

WAYS TO MANAGE CONFLICT SUCCESSFULLY – *MAYBE EVEN CHEERFULLY!*

By Lissa Eilers Johnsen, CMC, CITP.CPA

We all encounter professional conflict – whether it relates to personnel issues, vendor relations, customer / client concerns, owner / management disagreements, or competitive situations. Our professional lives are filled with opportunities to manage conflict.

However, most of us, when given the choice, will shy away from or even ignore conflict rather than deal with it. Why? More than likely, it is because conflict is very uncomfortable and facing conflict is usually not fun. Perhaps we avoid conflict because we think that managing conflict is expected to be a *natural* skill – and often a skill that we don't think we even have. But if managing conflict were an innate skill, then there wouldn't be a plethora of business courses, web sites, books and other content available to help us develop our conflict management abilities.

In my almost 40 years of living and my 18 years of being in the business world, I have seen that those individuals who are able to manage conflict strategically are usually also those who have the most success in life and business.

To explore the topic of conflict in depth, you have to come to terms with your feelings about it. Most of us feel that professional conflict is negative; we see it as draining our energy, reducing our focus, causing discomfort, hostility and ultimately costing us time and money. This can be true, but only when conflict is allowed to persist.

Instead, if conflict is well managed, it can also be a very positive, transforming influence on your job, firm and/or company. Conflict typically highlights problems and promotes change. Conflict often encourages shared solutions and can enhance the morale and team spirit of your company when it is dealt with openly and promptly. Conflict can stimulate the creativity and innovation in your organization. Natural conflict and contention is actually a key force in driving positive change and growth.

To ensure that conflict has a positive influence on your job, firm and/or company, it is important to develop your conflict management skills. The first step in this process is to identify your “normal” methods for dealing with conflict and then consciously choose a more effective method to use as circumstances dictate.

So, What Is Your Conflict Management Style?

Most people have a “conflict comfort zone” that is their traditional method for managing conflict when it arises. However, we are all capable of switching conflict styles and we typically use several or all of these four methods, depending upon the situation, timing and the person with whom we are experiencing the conflict.

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When conflict arises in your firm or company, do you...

- **Avoid it?** The conflict avoider often develops rationale for the conflict, dodges meetings or conversations where conflict is present and hopes the conflict will resolve itself on its own. It rarely does!
- **Give in to the conflicting party?** This conflict management technique has us accommodating the other party's wishes, eschewing our own goals to resolve the conflict.
- **Compete with the conflicting party in an attempt to win or be "most right"?** Usually, this conflict style is exhibited by unwillingness to compromise and an attempt to argue who's "right" and who's "wrong." Unfortunately, this rarely produces a "real" winner as the underlying source of conflict is never resolved and the matter usually becomes personal.
- **Compromise?** If so, you're probably a pretty good peacemaker, agreeing to give something up, provided the other party does the same, so that a conflict can be resolved.

Avoiding, giving in, competing and compromising are all valid methods for "dealing" with conflict, but they **won't generate the kind of positive energy that is possible when you manage conflict collaboratively.**

To develop a collaborative conflict management solution, it is helpful to understand the underlying causes of your conflict. Adapting from Bartol & Martin's Management and from a seminar presented by Convergence Coaching, LLC, the six causes of conflict are when:

- **Goals are incompatible.** This is when your goals and the other party's goals are not in sync which often happens without realizing it. For instance, you may want to increase the number of new clients in the practice, when your partner wants to reduce the amount of firm resources spent on marketing and selling. Clearly, these two strategies cannot co-exist and benefit the firm.
- **You're in an interdependent relationship.** Conflict in this area is caused when you have to rely on another person to achieve your goals, but you feel they are inhibiting you by their lack of performance. We have all experienced this when someone on our team or in our department simply isn't pulling their weight or meeting expectations.
- **Resources are scarce.** This happens when you and another party need certain resources to meet your goals, but there are not enough of those resources available for you both to use. I only need to say the words "budgeting" for you to recall the last time you encountered this source of conflict.
- **Communication failures occur.** This is when your goals or needs or those of the party with whom you are in conflict are not clearly or completely expressed. In public accounting, this happens often when all owners are not "straight" about their intentions and desires at the partnership table but instead pursue them outside of group discussions.
- **Individual differences are realized.** We all differ culturally, politically, spiritually, by generation and in many other ways. Conflict can occur when those differences come to light. On occasion,

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in larger companies, the management is from the Baby Boomer generation and they are managing the Gen-X staff, which can cause individual differences.

- **Reward systems are not properly aligned with goals.** When people are rewarded for behavior that is counter-productive to your goals or needs, this can cause conflict.

I have successfully used a 12 step Conflict Management strategy adapted with permission from Convergence Coaching, LLC. I have documented a step-by-step conflict management worksheet (below), which is based on this conflict management strategy. This worksheet will help you further develop or enhance your conflict management skills and to work toward conflict resolution.

Conflict Management Worksheet		
Step	Process	Your Actions or Thoughts
Identify	Identify that a conflict exists: examine why and consider solutions. Develop your strategy following the 12 steps.	
Set the stage	Set the time and place for discussion: avoid distractions and public places – give yourself enough time.	
Explain your view – expectations/ observations	Establish what your expectation or desire was; identify how the behavior or outcome differed.	
Ask for their view	Ask for the other party's perspective on the situation.	
Listen	Stop and listen! Don't assume. Listen carefully for clues or solutions or new facts that change your view.	

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Step	Process	Actions to take
Share the consequences	Share your view of the consequences of the situation as it sits today; provide concrete examples of the impacts and how these impacts make you feel.	
Reiterate your commitment	Whether to the relationship or to a shared or known ideal, reiterate what you are committed to	
Ask for their solution	Ask for help in developing a solution to the conflict.	
Listen	Then stop and listen again!	
Refine, offer alternatives, agree	Agree on what you are both going to do to resolve the conflict.	
Reiterate commitment	Reiterate what you are committed to.	
Document as appropriate	Consider putting your understanding in writing – most important in professional matters.	

Being able to identify the root cause of the conflict requires open communication with your conflict “partner.” To get to that point of openness, you’ll both have to shed your traditional conflict management styles and quit making each other wrong (truly the hardest part of the process). Only then can honestly examine each other’s goals and develop solutions to achieve your desired outcomes (or close to them).

Conflict is here to stay and is actually healthy. The degree to which we can implement the suggested conflict management techniques appropriately will enhance the probability of business success and personal enrichment / satisfaction. It will be well worth the effort.

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