

## Conflict Management: Style isn't just for the Catwalks

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In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Oscar Wilde wrote, "In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity, is the vital thing". Conflict situations may sometimes be about trivial issues, but to those embroiled within it they are often a matter of gravest importance.

So, should we adopt Wilde's advice wholeheartedly and concentrate only on style when resolving conflict? Well, not entirely. Trust is normally an early casualty of conflict, and sincerity often a key step on the way to real resolution. But it can be very useful to be aware of the different styles one can adopt when faced with conflict, and your own preferences and dislikes when managing conflict.

An early consideration is how all participants, including the mediators, view conflict. Is it perceived as a wholly negative construct, or is it perceived as potentially positive? The words used to describe the issues often indicate the nature of people's instinctive response to the idea of conflict; those who see it as something bad to be avoided may use wholly negative words such as "war", "fight", "quarrel" or "clash"; those who see it as more positive may refer to "challenge", "diversity", "difference" or "debate".

A second dimension involves the preference for internalising or externalising the actual management of conflict; does the individual tend to see conflict as a personal challenge and an opportunity to explore others' disagreements with them, or do they prefer to help others resolve their conflicts, operating as an objective third party?

Both dimensions are illustrated in the table below:

	Negative view	Positive view
Others	I dislike conflict and only deal with it when I can mediate to smooth things over	I see conflict as an opportunity to see things differently and enjoy helping others resolve their conflicts
Self	I avoid conflict and only deal with it when my strongest beliefs or needs are attacked	I see conflict as a personal challenge and readily become involved in expressing and exploring others' constructive differences of opinion with me

Leung and Mei-Tai Fan (1997), in an overview of 'dispute processing' in different cultures, summarised the difference between **Methods** for handling disputes and **Modes** of Conflict Resolution.

Methods are the processes by which the parties seek to resolve the dispute - yielding, negotiation, mediation, and adjudication/ arbitration – which vary mainly in how far the parties try to seek a solution between themselves, or whether a third party is used.

Modes (or Conflict Resolution Style) focus more on the motivations and behaviours of the conflicting parties. One of the more popular models in this area was proposed by Ken Thomas, who developed a questionnaire with Jerry Kilman to assess one's preferred modes of conflict resolution.

Thomas' model focuses attention on two key behaviours which will influence style: the degree of *co-operation* in which one is willing to engage, and how *assertive* one is likely to be in pursuing one's interests. The combined levels of these two factors define five different 'Conflict Handling Modes': competing, collaborating, compromising, accommodating and avoiding. Individuals tend to have one or two preferred conflict handling styles, dependent on their personalities and the attendant circumstances, but their preferred styles may not always match the circumstances. Similarly, different cultures find certain styles more congenial than others, and it is probably true to say that in the West there tends to be a stronger emphasis on outcome and in Asia the emphasis is more likely to be on process and relationship, although of course an individual may adopt a style more typical of a different culture.

For example, the competing mode – the classic “outcome” method - is also the traditional adversarial method of resolving conflict in the courts; individuals compete for a favourable judgment and what one side wins the other side loses. This method is most effective when there is no relationship between the parties and all that is at stake is the victory; it is much more destructive when the two parties have a shared history and the conflict damages winner and loser alike. Similarly, the avoiding mode is most effective when the outcome is of little importance and there is again no context for the relationship outside the dispute, as for example in the decision not to complain to a restaurant after a poor meal. It is a much less successful method in, for example, the parent/child or spousal relationship, where avoidance of a dispute can breed more serious problems later on.

The three “contextual” methods - compromise, accommodating and collaborating - all need either face to face negotiation or the intervention of a third party or mediator to succeed. The most co-operative of all the modes is accommodation, when one individual wholly sacrifices their interest to the other party. This may be perceived as a virtuous or generous action, and is again most effective when the relationship matters more than the outcome; when the relationship between the two will be best served by the total victory of one party, and when the matter at issue does not permit compromise or sharing – for instance, when an individual withdraws from a promotion procedure so that his friend may be selected.

The commonest form of negotiated conflict resolution is the compromise, when each party agrees or is persuaded to give up a little of what they want in order that both may receive partial satisfaction. It has been somewhat cynically described as a celebration of mutual dissatisfaction, but in reality it is a very useful outcome where the relationship and the personal standing of the participants needs to be maintained, and when it is impossible to

reposition matters so that both parties achieve what they want. A typical “compromise” situation occurs when a couple agree to use the family car on alternate days, or when each takes it in turn to choose a favourite television programme and to watch the other’s choice without complaint.

Collaboration is the most successful form of conflict resolution because acceptance of its outcomes is longer lasting. However, it is the most difficult to attain. It requires an imaginative recasting of the problem so that both parties essentially get what they want, even if it is not in the form they first demanded it. It is the classic “win/win” situation, when each succeeds and face is maintained by each equally. An example of collaboration is when a retailer agrees to lower profit margins on his goods in return for advantageous positioning or promotion within the store, so that the store pays less per item to the retailer, but more items are sold, to their mutual benefit. The initial conflict was probably presented in a much more confrontational, “competing” mode as “We have to pay you less for your goods if we are to continue to stock and sell them” versus “We refuse to accept lower prices for our goods and will sell them through your competitors instead”. The collaborative approach may have come from the skill of one of the participants, or it may have resulted from expert mediation.

An individual’s preferred style of conflict resolution probably has wider implications for their interpersonal style and motivation than merely how they are likely to behave when faced with conflict. The differences in motivation between the highly competitive individual (whose need is to win) and the accommodating individual (whose aim is to preserve relationships) will be seen in the way they make business decisions, handle relationships with colleagues, and manage their teams, to name but few examples.

Individual style is important in determining how the person will go about resolving and tackling conflict, but there is another important factor to consider. Most of the models discussed above have their roots in research conducted within Western culture, with the assumption too easily made that they can be exported across the world with little or no amendment. But, almost as important as individual style is the impact of culture – national, organisational, religious, or other – on one’s approach to conflict.

Leung and Mei-Tai Fan looked at a number of cultural dimensions that influence the preferred style of conflict handling or the method of resolution:

- **Structure of social relationships:** simple, transactional, relationships have less value attached to them, and so in cultures (such as the USA) where there is a greater predominance of these relationships, one is more likely to find competitive/adversarial styles of conflict and resolution. Where social relationships are more highly valued, the preference is for negotiation and mediation.
- **Individualism vs Collectivism:** an obvious factor, but not one that works in a simplistic way. The individualist concern for the satisfaction of one’s own needs is more clearly aligned with competitive strategies for handling conflict, whereas one might assume

that in collectivist cultures people will be more prepared to compromise and negotiate.

However, it's important not to ignore the precise direction of collectivism i.e. harmony and group solidarity with *members of your own cultural group* (in-group). The same does not apply to dealings with members of outgroups, where more competitive strategies might take over, which enables a marked contrast in an individual's style of conflict handling, depending on whom they're dealing with.

- **Communications and Procedures:** studies here have again focused on the national-cultural effects of 'context': where the actual content of the message contains much less information than the context and way it is delivered e.g. courtesy and protocol. But this can just as easily be translated into different organisational norms – the less concerned one is with procedure, 'face', or other context, the more solutions-focused (and potentially assertive) the conflict style becomes)

It is probably simplistic nowadays to characterise the Westerner as adversarial and the Asian as collaborative in style; the mass media have brought the concepts of materialistic individualism to most parts of the globe and, conversely, there is now much more interest in the West in the more collaborative approach to conflict management. However, it is interesting to note that in the West collaboration is actually described in competitive, outcome oriented terms - "win win" - rather than as a way of maintaining the relationship in which the outcome is secondary. In our view, much greater emphasis needs to be placed on participant relationships if conflict management is to be really effective.

In our work in conflict resolution, we aim to establish the history and the needs of the individuals, and then find how best to help both parties move away from the constraints of history to a more positive future, with increased understanding and respect for the other person. Much of this depends on persuading each person to see the issues through the eyes of the other. Although conflict management that has been rooted in a long history often begins with an absolute refusal to consider forgetting or forgiving the past, we have been surprised by how readily people will set aside long held differences when they stop justifying the past and examine the future through another's eyes. Usually this means re-presenting the problem so that collaboration, if possible, or at least compromise, is agreed.

However, artificial solutions are no solutions at all, and it is essential that both parties fully accept the agreed outcome. One of our clients asked us to mediate between two directors with fundamentally different ideas on how the organisation was to proceed. One wanted to retain the status quo; the other wanted to make major changes in the structure and the vision of the company. It was clear that change was necessary, and that both directors could not have their way, so there was no compromise or "win/win" solution possible. However, we focused instead on finding ways to improve the relationship between the two individuals, so that the change-averse director felt valued and consulted, rather than ignored and undermined, and the pro change director felt supported rather than blocked unnecessarily at every turn. Although one "lost" the argument, both won the war!

As mediators and managers of conflict, we clearly need to be aware of the history, background and important issues which gave rise to the dispute. However, at least as important will be the perceptions of the individuals and how they see the nature of conflict itself; their own preferred method of dealing with conflict, and the culture or cultures within which they are operating. Issues are relatively easy to resolve; opposing styles are far more intransigent. Like fashion, mediation is about changing perceptions, and the most successful mediators, like the most successful fashion houses, are those who use different modes or styles to suit their different clients, rather than always relying on a single timeless garment to influence hearts and minds.

**References**

Available on request – please contact [ops@opsltd.com](mailto:ops@opsltd.com)