

Both competition and interdependence between individuals or groups in an operation are “structural” sources of conflict. When frictions arise from people or crews not getting what they need because another has either taken it first or not produced it as expected, a dispassionate assessment can reveal underlying causes and point to solutions. The following steps are typical:

1. **Problem Definition.** Identify symptoms of trouble, opposing objectives, and concerns from perspectives of all involved. Distill a statement of the problem.
2. **Diagnosis.** Distinguish factors contributing to the conflict, personal as well as structural.
3. **Generation of Alternatives.** Collect various ideas to improve or change causal behaviors. No evaluating yet.
4. **Decision Making.** Compare ideas and choose a promising alternative that all parties accept.
5. **Tactical Planning.** Design a specific action plan to implement the decision and a schedule for periodic assessment.
6. **Implementation.** Make the adjustments and evaluate according to plan.

Although the outcome is more likely to be accepted if this process is conducted collaboratively, a manager with authority who prefers to decide alone what changes to make can utilize the same steps.

Conflict Management Styles

A framework developed by Kenneth Thomas and Ralph Kilmann relates the modes of handling conflict to different combinations of two basic orientations: (1) assertiveness—the extent to which an individual attempts to satisfy his or her own concerns, and (2) cooperativeness—the extent to which an individual attempts to satisfy others’ concerns.

Five distinct modes of handling conflict are:

- **Avoidance:** Pursuing neither one’s own nor others’ concerns.
- **Accommodation:** With high concern for others’ needs, giving in to them.
- **Competition:** Being concerned only with one’s own satisfaction and pursuing it at the expense of others. A power-oriented mode.
- **Compromise:** Being equally concerned with one’s and others’ needs and compromising between them. Never takes care of anyone fully.
- **Collaboration:** Showing great concern for both own and others’ needs; working with the others to find a solution acceptable to all.

Circumstances in which each of the five modes are most appropriate, according to Thomas and Kilmar, follow:

Avoiding

- When an issue is trivial, of only passing importance, or when other more important issues are pressing
- When you perceive no chance of satisfying your concerns, e.g., when you have no power to change something (someone's personality, national politics)
- When the potential damage of confronting a conflict outweighs the benefits of its resolution
- When time is needed to let people cool down
- When you need more time to gather information
- When others can resolve the conflict more effectively

Accommodating

- When you realize you are wrong, to allow a better position to be heard, to learn from others, and to show that you are reasonable
- When the issue is much more important to the other person than to you, to satisfy the needs of others, and as a goodwill gesture to help maintain a cooperative relationship
- When preserving harmony and avoiding disruption are especially important
- When the issue could aid in the development of subordinates by allowing them to experiment and learn from their mistakes

Competing

- When quick, decisive action is vital, e.g., emergencies
- When unpopular courses of action are needed on important issues, e.g. cost-cutting, enforcing unpopular rules, disciplining
- When the issue is vital to your business welfare and you know you're right

Compromising

- When goals are moderately important but not worth the effort or potential disruption of more assertive modes
- When two opponents with equal power are strongly committed to mutually exclusive goals
- When temporary settlements must be achieved for complex issues
- When expedient solutions must be arrived at under time pressure

Collaborating

- When consensus is important within the business or commitment is needed for successful implementation
- When both sets of concerns are too important to be compromised
- When you want to understand the views of others and test your own assumptions
- When it is desirable to merge insights from people with different perspectives
- When it is high time to work through hard feelings that have been interfering with an interpersonal relationship





Managerial help in conflict resolution

The ranch manager has noticed that Office Assistant Betty has a problem with Bob, a field supervisor who constantly interrupts her work with chit-chat, personal problems, etc., when he comes to the office to hand in daily time sheets and pick up customer orders. Although these two generally seem to like each other, their styles at work differ. Betty likes to work alone and has a track record of fast, accurate work, while Bob enjoys leading his work crews and talking with everyone else on the ranch. Yesterday, for the second straight week, she was two hours late getting out the weekly payroll. When the manager called her in to discuss the problem, she became angry and accused Bob of making her too slow. Here is how he “advised himself” as he went through steps of trying to nip this budding conflict:

Talk with Betty

1. Listen to Betty and acknowledge her anger without with judging her. Don't rush her. She needs time to let off steam.
2. Stay calm and ask questions to collect the facts. Avoid “why” questions that may make her defensive. Communicate that I am concerned. Summarize for her what I have heard.
3. Let her know that I have to be objective and want to help solve this problem.
4. Ask her if she would mind meeting with Bob to discuss ways that they can both ensure the payroll gets out on time to his crews. Mention that I plan on meeting with Bob to discuss the issue. Ask if she wants me to speak to Bob about the two of them meeting.

Prepare for Talk with Bob

1. Review Bob's performance record.
2. Try to anticipate his concerns.

Meet with Bob

1. Start on a positive note: “Sure appreciate the long hours you are putting in during this harvest.”
2. Clearly explain the problem without judging or scolding.
3. Ask for and listen to Bob's assessment of the situation. Seems that Bob is under a lot of stress at harvest time and feels he needs some time to get away from the field periodically during the day. Acknowledge his concerns.
4. Tell him that I would like Betty and him to get together to work this out. Let him know that Betty will be getting in touch to arrange a meeting and that I will check back with both of them by the end of the week.

Give Betty the Go-ahead

1. Confirm with Betty that Bob expects her to contact him and that I will be checking with both of them later.

Check back with Bob and Betty

1. See if and how the problem has been resolved by speaking to both Betty and Bob.
2. If they have not been able to take care of it, plan to arrange a meeting with them both.