

# UNDERSTANDING & MANAGING CONFLICT

Conflict is unavoidable, and each of us experiences it with someone we encounter in both our personal, social, and work life. It occurs when there is a difference of opinion or interest between two or more parties. The ability to recognize, prevent negative outcomes, and resolve conflict effectively is an important skill.

## KNOW THE SOURCES OF CONFLICT

- Relationship: a personal disagreement/interpersonal or emotional conflict
- Process: disagreement over how to achieve a goal
- Task: disagreeing about what the goal of a specific task is
- Status: disagreement over your own position within a group/relationship

Give some thought to the source and then reflect on what your goal is and how you are going to achieve that. Various factors can contribute to being in conflict with another person, such as personality style, upbringing (e.g., messaging from parents), belief systems, and one's history with the person you are having a conflict with.

## KNOW YOUR CONFLICT STYLE

There are two primary types of styles that individuals have when in conflict:

- The Avoiders: those who try to avoid conflict and shy away from it. They value positive relationships, avoid hurting others' feelings, treasure harmony, and often want to accommodate others.
- The Seekers: those who are prone to engage in conflict when it arises or actively seek it. They prefer directness, honesty, and are often advocates.

It is important to understand your style in handling conflict as well as the style of the party you are in conflict with. For example, if you're both avoiders, one of you will need to take the lead. However, if you are both seekers, you will need to focus on taking time-outs to de-escalate the emotions in the conflict.

## HOW TO RESPOND (NOT REACT) TO CONFLICT

Following are the four primary ways to respond to a conflict:

- Being Direct: discuss the issue clearly and to the point without attacking the other party (avoid "you" statements making it about them, but focus on the issue). This can be seen as too assertive but works better if one is goal-focused.
- Doing Nothing: this often feels the easiest but resolves nothing and can prolong the conflict.
- Indirectly Address: hint at what you want or ask someone else to ask for it on your behalf.

- Leave the Conflict: end a relationship, quit your job, transfer to a different position, etc. This choice may provide temporary relief, but might not be fulfilling long-term.

"Being Direct" can be the emotionally hardest but most often gets the best long-term outcome.

## WAYS TO MANAGE & REDUCE THE NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF CONFLICT

- Prepare: the more you prepare, the more effective your conflict resolution will be.
- Avoid Making it "Me Against Them": focus on ways to reach goals and listing options.
- Take a Time Out: take a break by "sleeping" on the issue or agree with the other party on a time to come back to discuss the differences of opinion to gain some perspective.
- Alter Your Tone: purposely lower your voice or change your tone to be less threatening to the other party.
- Be at the Same Level: be aware of potential power dynamics, so stand if they are standing, or sit if they are sitting.
- Acknowledge the Other Person's Emotions and Perspective: listen to them (this does not mean you have to agree with them). The more we acknowledge the other person's emotions, the better the chance they will feel heard and listen to you in return.
- Talk it Out with Someone Else First: get another person's objective input and/or tell someone else you need to vent first before dealing with the person you are having conflict with.
- Focus on the Goal: not on them.
- Ask for Help: some conflict is incredibly difficult to resolve on your own. Consider seeking a mediator or a counselor's input.

Focusing on the goal, being honest, and managing your conflict effectively can bring more of what you want and reduce stress.

## NEED MORE SUPPORT? WE'RE HERE FOR YOU

If you'd like to learn more about mental health services or are interested in support, counselors are available at no charge to you for confidential services. If you work on an academic campus, reach out to the Faculty and Staff Counseling and Consultation Office (FASCCO) at 734-936-8660 or via email at [fascco@umich.edu](mailto:fascco@umich.edu).



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