Diversity, Difference and Conflict

Awareness and Skills Building for Enhancing Workplace Effectiveness

How would it be if everyone we worked with was just like us...shared the same values, communicated the same way, and approached tasks just as we do?

Your first thought might be, “Well, that sure would make things easier!” or “Then we wouldn’t have any problems!” Or, you might think, “That would sure be boring!” Whether we like it or not, we work with and serve people who are different than ourselves in all kinds of ways: race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, physical ability, etc.

When things are running smoothly, when everyone is getting their needs met, when co-workers feel they are on the same page, this ‘difference’ doesn’t make much of a difference.

But what happens when disagreements or misunderstandings arise? When people feel unheard or mistreated? To explore these issues, take the time to engage with this online training module. The training was designed to take 20-30 minutes, but offers a lot of food for continuing thought and reflection.
Does difference make a difference in conflict?

In part one of the Conflict Style Questionnaire, you are asked to rate how often you do certain behaviors when in conflict/disagreement with a particular co-worker or manager whom you would consider to be fairly similar to you in terms of values, beliefs, and workplace expectations.

In part two, you are asked to rate the same set of behaviors, this time in terms of how often you use them when you have a conflict or disagreement with a coworker or client whom you consider to be very different from you in terms values, beliefs, and workplace expectations.

No one will see your answers, so it is to your benefit to take the time to consider each answer and respond honestly.

Adapted from the Kraybill Conflict Style Inventory and the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument
### Part 1: Conflict with People Who Are Like You

When you have conflict or disagreement with a coworker who is **SIMILAR** to you, how frequently do you do the following behaviors? *Circle the corresponding number in the columns to the right.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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## Assessment Results

*Add your scores for each set of questions and enter the number in the appropriate column.*

<table>
<thead>
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<th>BEHAVIORS</th>
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Interpreting Your Scores

If you scored 9 or higher in any one style, this means that you have a strong tendency towards this approach with this particular person or in this context. It is therefore worth examining the effectiveness of this approach. If there is a difference between your high scores in the two assessments, consider the reasons why that is.

If you scored equally in two categories, this means that you naturally and equally use both styles. Can you figure out what aspects of a conflict contribute to which style you end up using?

Your second highest score is your ‘fall back’ style. Some aspect of a conflict causes you to resist your initial inclinations.

If your scores were fairly even for all categories, this means that you adapt to different situations. It is worth considering which aspects of a conflict lead you to use one style over another.

Reflection Questions

Regardless of your scores, it is worth taking some time to reflect upon the effectiveness of your approach to conflict or disagreement with the two people you had in mind while filling out the assessment.

- How’s it working for you? Are you getting your needs met most of the time?
- What about the long term impact on your relationship?
- How do you think this person feels towards you after you have a disagreement, argument, or dispute?
- How would you describe the level of trust that exists between you?
- Did anything about your results on the assessment surprise you?
- If there were differences in your scores for the two parts, why do you think that is?
- Do these results raise any questions for you?
Which Conflict Style Is the Best?

You probably already know the answer to that question . . . it depends. Each style has its potential uses as well as potential pitfalls. A few are listed for you on the following slides. As you read through, see if you can think of examples from your own experiences with the people you thought of during the assessment when you have experienced the uses and pitfalls of each style.

**Compete**

When we compete in a conflict, our main concern is to win, get our way, and/or to prove we are in the right.

**Strategies include:**
- Argument
- Logic
- Force
- Power plays
- Holding your ground
- Passive-aggressive behaviors

**Potential Uses**
- When it's a matter of principles, values or ethics
- When safety is at stake
- In business or sports contexts

**Potential Pitfalls**
- Professional and interpersonal relationships may suffer
- You risk losing something important to you
- You lose the opportunity to learn from understanding the other side
Avoid

When we avoid a conflict, our main concern is to keep safe and/or to avoid confrontation.

Strategies include:

- Staying away from the other person
- Refusing to discuss the issue
- Making jokes
- Changing the subject

Potential Uses

- When emotional level is running high
- When there is danger
- When it’s not important
- When you don’t think that you or the other person is capable of having a productive conversation

Potential Pitfalls

- Professional and interpersonal relationships may suffer
- Your needs don’t get met
- You lose the opportunity to learn from understanding the other side
Accommodate

We accommodate when our main concern is to keep the relationship safe or comfortable, when we decide it is more important to meet the other person’s needs, or when we want their approval.

Strategies include:

- Not voicing your opinion or needs
- Giving in after some discussion

Potential Uses

- When the issue is more important to the other person
- When the other person is in a position of power
- When the other person has less power (elders, children)
- When you are afraid the relationship may get damaged if you assert your needs

Potential Pitfalls

- Resentment can build
- Your needs don’t get met
- Your relationship with the other person may become weakened and imbalanced
Compromise

We try to comprise when we are concerned with getting some of our needs met, but are willing to let go of others in order to find a solution.

Strategies include:

- Giving in on some issues and remaining firm on others
- Seeking a fair middle ground

Potential Uses

- When you need a fast, easy solution
- When the issue isn’t really important or during minor disagreements

Potential Pitfalls

- Your needs don’t fully get met
- You lose the opportunity to find lasting or better solutions
- Your relationship with the other person may become weakened
Collaborate

We try to collaborate in a conflict when we are equally concerned about getting our needs met in the situation as well as the other person’s needs so that the relationship is not damaged.

**Strategies include:**

- Open discussion
- Clarification of concerns
- Seeking mutually agreeable solutions

**Potential Uses**

- When both the relationship and the issues are important

**Potential Pitfalls**

- Time and energy consuming
- Difficult, requires commitment from both parties
Application Practice

Test Your Understanding of the Conflict Styles

The following scenario presents a workplace conflict between two people of diverse nationalities, ages, and backgrounds. After you read the scenario, try to identity what "conflict style" best characterizes the given approach.

As you consider which conflict style is being used, think about what the potential outcome might be for the relationship between Lisa and Yin.

Lisa is a 35 year old Caucasian woman who has been manager of one of the campus cafeterias for the past two years. One of her employees is a 60 year old Chinese woman named Yin who has been working in this unit for six years. Previous to Lisa, Yin’s manager was a young man named Bob. Bob had been very kind to Yin, whose husband had died a few years ago. He helped her with a few repairs in her home and welcomed the traditional Chinese dishes she would cook for him as a thank you. Lisa is very different from Bob. She politely says "Good morning" when she comes into work, but other than that, she only talks about work related issues.

Lisa finds Yin’s habit of sharing and asking for personal information from her co-workers and the customers to be very unprofessional. When she has tried to address the issue, Yin became very upset and emotional. Lisa decided to let it go until one day she heard Yin complaining about work related issues to one of their vendors. She decided to write up an official warning to put an end to this behavior.

When she found out, Yin was furious and insulted. She had not done anything wrong. The vendor was a nice young man who is very polite and always asks Yin how she is doing when he makes a delivery. Yin thought that Lisa would do well to also show such kindness. She finds Lisa to be very cold and uncaring. This warning was outright disrespectful and Yin was not going to stand for it. She decided to file a grievance of discrimination against Lisa.
Five Approaches to the Problem

Decide which Conflict Style best applies to each approach.

Approach 1

Lisa backs down and withdraws the warning because she is afraid of how Yin will act during the grievance process. She does not want to be accused of being racist.

This approach can be best described as:
☐ Compete  ☐ Avoid  ☐ Accommodate  ☐ Compromise  ☐ Collaborate

Approach 2

Yin or Lisa transfers to another working unit.

This approach can be best described as:
☐ Compete  ☐ Avoid  ☐ Accommodate  ☐ Compromise  ☐ Collaborate

Approach 3

Let the grievance process examine the evidence and determine the best course of action.

This approach can be best described as:
☐ Compete  ☐ Avoid  ☐ Accommodate  ☐ Compromise  ☐ Collaborate

Approach 4

Lisa agrees to withdraw the warning letter if Yin agrees to stop discussing personal issues with co-workers, clients and vendors.

This approach can be best described as:
☐ Compete  ☐ Avoid  ☐ Accommodate  ☐ Compromise  ☐ Collaborate

Approach 5

Yin and Lisa agree to attend mediation sessions to try to improve their working relationship.

This approach can be best described as:
☐ Compete  ☐ Avoid  ☐ Accommodate  ☐ Compromise  ☐ Collaborate
Answers

Approach 1
- Compete — This is not the best answer because Lisa is not asserting her needs.
- Avoid — This is partially true because Lisa is not addressing the conflict, but Yin's needs are being partially attended to and Lisa's are not.
  ★ Accommodate — This is the best answer because Lisa is giving in to Yin's demand to withdraw the warning.
  - Compromise — This is not the best answer because Lisa is not getting her needs met.
  - Collaborate — This is not the best answer because Lisa and Yin did not work together.

Approach 2
- Compete — This is not the best answer because they are not engaging in the conflict.
  ★ Avoid — This is the best answer because Yin or Lisa chooses to move to another work area rather than try to work out their differences.
  - Accommodate — This is not the best answer because neither one is giving in to the other.
  - Compromise — This is not the best answer because they are not meeting halfway.
  - Collaborate — This is not the best answer because they are not working together to resolve their issues.

Approach 3
  ★ Compete — This is the best answer because someone will "win" and someone will "lose" in the grievance.
  - Avoid — Although Lisa and Yin are avoiding trying to work it out together, they are not avoiding the problem altogether.
  - Accommodate — This is not the best answer because neither one is giving in to the other.
  - Compromise — This is not the best answer because they are not trying to meet halfway.
  - Collaborate — This is not the best answer because they are not working together to resolve their issues.

Approach 4
- Compete — This is not the best answer because each person is getting some of her needs met.
- Avoid — This is not the best answer because Lisa and Yin are trying to resolve their issues.
- Accommodate — This is not the best answer because both parties are giving something.
  ★ Compromise — This is the best answer because each party is getting some of their needs met, but not all the issues have been resolved.
  - Collaborate — This is not the best answer because although each party has given and gotten something they wanted, the underlying issues have not been resolved.
Answers (continued)

Approach 5

- Compete — This is not the best answer because Lisa and Yin are at least attempting to work together.
- Avoid — This is not the best answer because Lisa and Yin are at least attempting to work together.
- Accommodate — This is not the best answer because they are at least attempting to work together (although in the mediation session, it is possible that one will accommodate the other).
- Compromise — This is not the best answer because they are at least attempting to work together (although in the mediation session, it is possible that one will accommodate the other).

★Collaborate — This is the best answer because the parties intend to work together to try to resolve their issues and get their needs met.

Congratulations! You just completed the application practice exercise.

Hopefully, you now feel more confident in identifying what each conflict style might look like. Also, as you considered each strategy, you might have thought about how each one might have had a positive or negative impact on the relationship between Yin and Lisa.

Personal Reflection

Think about a conflict you’ve had recently with a friend or co-worker. Which conflict style(s) did you engage in? What about the other person? How did this approach impact the outcome? Would another approach have been more effective?
The Complexity of Conflict

As we have seen thus far, there are many ways to approach conflict. One of the steps to making more effective choices is to first understand the complexity of conflict. Rarely is an argument, conflict, or disagreement as simple as it seems on the surface.

Above the Surface
The actions, behaviors, words, emotions and other observable aspects of the conflict

Below the Surface
The reasons why we respond to the set of events. This is influenced by:

- Your relationship with the other person
- The context in which the conflict takes place
- Your values and beliefs about appropriate behavior, right and wrong, desired/undesirable
- Our past experience/history with the other person as well as how we were raised
- The way in which we and others have communicated in regards to the events

Underlying the conflict between Yin and Lisa are differences in expectations and assumptions about the nature of workplace relationships. For Yin, workplace relationships are about showing that you care about the person as a whole person, not just as a coworker/employee. She treats others as she wishes to be treated.

Lisa wants to support her employees so that they can do their job well. In this way, the whole team can succeed together. For Lisa, employee success is related to professionalism in the workplace meaning boundaries between personal and work life and control over emotions. She tries to model this behavior.

From these differing perspectives, each woman views the other’s behavior negatively. Yet both strive for positive and supportive workplace relationships. Do you think that gaining a deeper understanding of the other person’s needs, expectations, and assumptions can help Yin and Lisa work more effectively together?
Understanding Ourselves and Others in Conflict

The following questions can serve as a reflective process to help you develop a better understanding of yourself and the other person with whom you are in conflict.

Read through the questions and contemplate how Lisa and Yin might answer them.

When you have finished reading through, think about a recent conflict with a friend or coworker and reflect on the questions.

What Happened
Describe the objective facts of the situation using neutral language. Refrain from interpretation or judgment.

Judgments & Assumptions

- What assumptions am I making about what is good and bad behavior for myself and the other person?
- What was I expecting from the other person in this situation?
- Why is that expectation appropriate in my eyes?
- Why do I think that person acted the way they did? What was their motivation?

Feelings & Values

- What emotional response did I have to the situation? Name and describe the feelings.
- Why is this situation a conflict for me? What values or beliefs are involved?

The Unknown

- What key information do I not have about the person or the situation?
- What do I not understand?
- What do I think the other person does not understand about me and/or my intentions?

None of these questions will magically give you the key to unlock the mystery of how to resolve your conflict. However, increasing your understanding of the “below the surface” aspects of the conflict may help you find ways to approach the situation. Understanding your emotional response to conflict will help you better explain it to the other person. Also, taking time to think about what you don’t know about the other person’s side of the issue opens up pathways to a new story about what is going on. This process may give you some ideas for starting a conversation about conflict.

Adapted from The Critical Moment Dialog Worksheet by Personal Leadership Seminars © 2006
Want to Learn More?

As you may have discovered by now, there are no right or easy answers as to how to approach conflict. What’s more, when there are additional factors such as race, age, ethnicity, and culture, the issues can be even more complex which makes approaching them even trickier.

Our fun and interactive workshops on Diversity, Difference, and Conflict provide you the opportunity to learn tools and practice skills that will help you approach all kinds of conflict more effectively. During our three-hour session you will:

- Explore how our culture and values effect the way we communicate and perceive others
- Learn tools for better understanding complex cultural situations
- Practice skills that will help you communicate more effectively in conflict situations

For more information or to schedule a training session for your department or organization, please contact Marlo Goldstein Hode, graduate coordinator of programming and professional development, at 573-882-2714 or mbgng9@mail.missouri.edu.