



ConvergenceCoaching, LLC
Managing Conflict Successfully - If Not Cheerfully!
Article 1 of 2

We all encounter professional conflict – whether it is owner disagreements, personnel issues, vendor relations matters, client concerns or competitive situations, our professional lives are filled with opportunities to manage it.

However, most of us, given the choice, will shy away or ignore conflict rather than deal with it. Why? More than likely, it's because conflict isn't fun – or even comfortable. Perhaps it's also because we might think that managing conflict is expected to be an *innate* skill – one that we don't have. But if that were the case, there wouldn't be a plethora of business courses, web sites, books and other content available to help us develop our conflict management abilities.

I believe that those who are able to manage conflict strategically are those who have the most success in life, which is why I have chosen the subject as the basis for this article.

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 practice. Conflict typically highlights problems and promotes change. It often encourages shared solutions and can enhance the morale and team spirit of your practice when it is dealt with openly and promptly. Conflict can stimulate the creativity and innovation in your organization.

So, to further develop your conflict management skills and ensure that conflict has a positive influence on your practice, it is important to identify your “normal” methods for dealing with conflict and then develop the ability to consciously choose a more effective method when appropriate.

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're 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're experiencing the conflict.

When conflict arises in your practice, 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 an 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, 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're inhibiting you by their lack of performance. We've all experienced this when someone on our team 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 aren't enough of those resources available for you both to use. I only need to say the words "firm 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're 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, generationally and in many other ways. Conflict can occur when those differences come to light.
- **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.

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).

In my concluding article on this topic, I’ll share a step-by-step conflict management methodology and provide some sample “conflict scripts” that will help you further develop or enhance your conflict management skills.

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