

FIVE STYLES OF MANAGING CONFLICT

1. AVOIDANCE (The Passive Turtle):

Motto: "I will stay out of it."

The intent is to stay out of the conflict, to avoid identification with either side, to be neutral. The passive turtle person says by his actions: *"I will not stick my neck out, it is not my problem."* The avoider either feels that a conflict is not worth the effort, that all conflict is wrong, or that a solution is not possible anyway, so why get involved?

The avoider is unassertive and passive, not promoting own ideas and interests nor helping others to promote theirs. This *"you lose, I lose"* scenario is often a non-productive strategy. Problems are not dealt with and can fester, leading to more serious conflict. The long-term use of this style may lead to a feeling of powerlessness and growing frustration.

2. ACCOMMODATION (The Lovable Teddy Bear):

Motto: "I will give in"

The intent is to preserve, at any cost, the relationships within the group and between opposing parties. The lovable teddy bear person says, *"Our getting along is more important than the conflict issues."* The accommodator will do everything possible to reduce the risk of damaging relationships. Issues, goals, and progress are less important than relationships.

The accommodator tries to embrace everyone involved, and when confrontation cannot be avoided, the solution that results in the least strain on relationships is supported. Sacrifice of personal aspirations and acceptance of blame are used to help bring peace and harmony. Continued use of this *"you win, I lose"* scenario is harmful for all involved. The accommodator may begin to think less of self and own ideas, while those who get their way may mistakenly begin to think that their ideas are superior and become accustomed to getting their way.

3. COMPETITIVE (The Aggressive Alligator)

Motto: "I will get my way"

The intent is to win, since winning is definitely better than the only other possibility – losing! The one competing doesn't necessarily wish to hurt the other parties or damage the relationship. Instead, he/she feels that own ideas, values, and goals are of supreme importance. Actions are assertive, using anything from smooth diplomacy or raw power, with one goal: to win. Manipulation can be used for the cause; and if necessary, there is the attempt to defeat opposition by blocking, wearing-down or intimidating them.

The aggressive alligator's message is *"I know what is best for everyone and for the organization. My way is the right way."* The long-term use of this *"I win, you lose"* scenario will result either in submission or in outright confrontation by those defeated. It can create polarization (a "we versus them" atmosphere), a lack of enthusiasm by defeated parties, and a growing frustration or hostility with the way the disagreement was handled.

4. COLLABORATION (The Wise Owl)

Motto: "Let's work for everyone's good"

The intent is to achieve a win solution for all parties. The collaborator is both issues-orientated and relationship-orientated, and believes that conflict can be turned into a positive, problem-solving process. The collaborator is assertive but also flexible, being convinced that disagreements can lead to positive growth. The wise owl, by actions says, *"I care and want to preserve relationships, but I will present and defend my ideas and others; so that we can find a solution where everyone wins."* Working for everyone's good, he/she will insist that all parties give clear messages as to their ideas and goals, and will work toward a process of communication and decision-making in a way that ensures fairness and avoids intimidation.

This is a *"you win, I win"* scenario and therefore can take some time and energy. The process builds trust and stronger relationships since all parties feel important and respected. Because decisions are fully owned by all parties, there is a high commitment to follow through.

5. COMPROMISE (The Clever Fox)

Motto: "I will meet you halfway"

The intent is to give each party some of the winnings as well as some of the losses. Since the compromiser does not feel that it is possible to satisfy everyone fully, the aim is that all parties will be at least partially satisfied, while at the same time relationships are preserved. The persuasive fox states, *"We will give you part of what you want if you give us part of what we want ... We must all submit our personal desires to serve the common good."* This style uses negotiation, bargaining, and trading, and is very popular with politicians and international negotiators.

Using *"we both win some, lose some"* scenario may result in watered-down solutions and halfhearted commitment to carry out the decisions made. Conflicts can continue in subtle ways and resurface in a new situation and strained relationships can continue. On the positive side, compromise often salvages stalemates over issues and relationships. While giving up the "best," it often achieves the "good."

* This material is adapted from Managing Conflict Creatively by Donald Palmer, 1990.