



# Avoiding Conflict is Not The Goal

## Manage the Conflict

Being able to engage naturally, easily, respectfully, and constructively in the midst of a conflict is something we all can learn – and is something that can serve us all well, once learned.

That we can then help others improve their own conflict competencies raises everyone’s game, and makes conflict something far less daunting and distressing for everyone, as well.



**F**or many, the mere thought of conflict triggers a deep, visceral, and automatic fight/flight reaction. But what is conflict? Why do people cope with conflict in such different ways and why do so many of those ways seem to only make things worse? Is it possible to become more competent with conflict, and if so, how? What if we could ENGAGE with conflict naturally, easily, respectfully, constructively? What if we could help others do the same? How would that improve your ability to get things done at work – and in life?

In the book, *Becoming a Conflict Competent Leader: How You and Your Organization Can Manage Conflict Effectively*, authors Craig

Runde and Tim Flanagan define conflict as: “Any situation in which people have apparently incompatible goals, interests, principles, or feelings.”

Based on that definition, conflict is inevitable; it cannot (and should not) be completely avoided. A better goal is to work on to reduce a conflict’s HARMFUL effects (hurt feelings, anger, frustration, score-keeping, passive-aggressive – or openly aggressive – retaliation/retribution, etc.) and maximize its BENEFICIAL effects (better brainstorming, more creative/effective problem solving, deeper/more meaningful interactions, increased respect and regard for each other, a greater willingness to tackle





more difficult challenges and opportunities, improved team camaraderie and success, etc.) – ideally, simultaneously.

Impossible? Hardly. But to do so, we must learn to better respond – not react, but respond – to conflict. Then, and only then, can we naturally focus LESS on how DIFFICULT conflict-based conversations might be, and focus MORE on how IMPORTANT they are to meaningfully address the issues that are causing the conflicts in the first place.

### Understanding Different Conflict Styles

In becoming more conflict capable, it's helpful to understand the different ways that people naturally react to conflict. As part of their work, Runde and Flanagan have identified five distinct conflict styles:

#### ◆ The Competing Style

People who prefer or naturally gravitate to this style demonstrate “high levels of interest in satisfying one’s own interests and low concern about the other person’s needs.” These people are often recognizable by their “in your face” win/lose affect.

#### ◆ The Avoiding Style

People who prefer or naturally gravitate to this style have a “low level of interest in meeting the needs of either person.” These people will go to extraordinary lengths to steer clear of anything that even resembles a conflict.

#### ◆ The Accommodating Style

People who prefer or naturally gravitate to this style have a “low level of concern about meeting one’s own needs and a high level of interest in meeting the other’s needs.” For them, they’d rather lose just to be through with it.

#### ◆ The Compromising Style

People who prefer or naturally gravitate to this style demonstrate a “mid-level

interest in the needs of both parties.” These are the people who suggest that “splitting the difference” is a reasonable strategy – whether it really is or not.

#### ◆ The Collaborating Style

People who prefer or naturally gravitate to this style demonstrate a “high level of interest in meeting both parties’ needs.” These are the true win/win or “both-gain” solution seekers and are typically the most conflict competent in the group.

It’s important to realize that the collaborative style is not always the best choice, though. Working collaboratively with an untrustworthy opponent, for example, all can be easily result in them by manipulating you. Similarly, when someone’s physical safety is an issue, avoiding a conflict may actually serve everyone better.

“Knowing more about the different styles and how others perceive them,” assert Runde and Flanagan, “can help you maintain your balance when dealing with someone who has a different style. It can also keep these differences from exacerbating the underlying conflict.”

There are other ways to assess one’s conflict style, as well. Mitchell R Hammer, PhD, as example, developed the Intercultural Conflict Style (ICS) model for “effectively managing and resolving disagreements and conflicts across cultural boundaries.” The ICS is a two-factor model that compares and contrasts how direct/indirect and the level of emotional restraint/expressiveness one demonstrates in communicating with others during conflict.

From this, four styles emerge: (See Exhibit I)

#### ◆ The Discussion Style

This style is more direct and emotionally restrained than the others. According to Dr. Hammer in his article titled, “The Intercultural Conflict Style Model”, the discussion style “emphasizes precision in language use and generally follows the

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maxim, say what you mean and mean what you say.” Discussions are usually based on objective facts and all parties are disciplined about keeping their personal feelings to themselves. Research shows that the US White American and Northern European cultures prefer this style for resolving conflicts.

◆ **The Engagement Style**

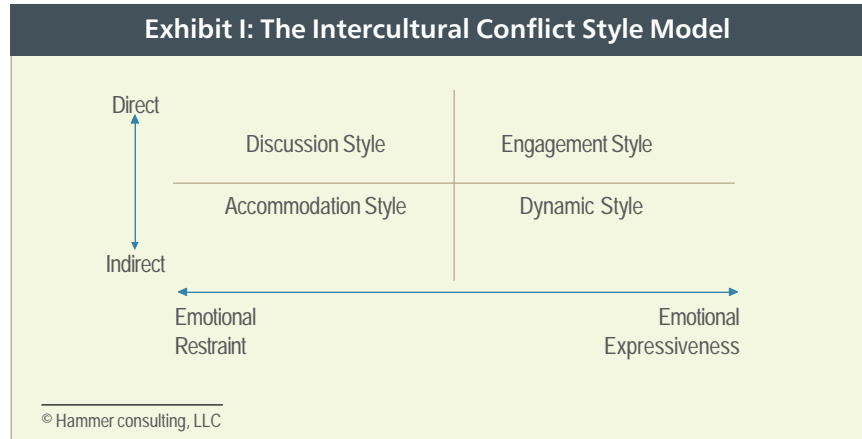
This style is verbally direct and emotionally expressive, and can get quite confrontational, at times. But these “more intense, verbal and nonverbal expressions of emotion,” are just how they show their true interest in finding a positive outcome. Research shows that the Russian and Greek cultures prefer this style for resolving conflicts.

◆ **The Accommodation Style**

This style “emphasizes a more indirect approach for dealing with areas of disagreement and a more emotionally restrained or controlled manner for dealing with each party’s emotional response to conflict.” Their intention is to keep a conflict from getting out of control and maintaining interpersonal harmony. As a result, they discourage any intense expression of emotion, considering them counterproductive in nature. Research shows that the Japanese and Southeast Asian cultures prefer this style for resolving conflicts.

◆ **The Dynamic Style**

This style “involves the use of more indirect strategies for dealing with substantive disagreements coupled with more emotionally intense expression.” Linguistic devices such as hyperbole, dramatic storytelling and an effusive repetition of key points and positions are common. Research



shows that many Arab cultures prefer this style for resolving conflicts.

The broader point is that any conflict style has its own set of pros and cons and contexts, and the more you understand what conflict styles you, and others around you, default to, the better your chances of responding in an increasingly conflict competent manner.

**Hot Buttons and Triggers**

Knowing that different people react to conflict in different ways is helpful. But what pushes us into conflict? Why is it that, in one instance, we feel imminently threatened, or triggered, by someone having “apparently incompatible goals, interests, principles, or feelings,” but in another instance, we do not? Why is it that the same person can trigger us in one situation, but not in another? Why is it that some people (or types of people) can trigger us regardless of circumstance?

The answer to all of these questions has a lot to do with something called Hot Buttons, a central component of the Conflict Dynamics Profile (CDP) assessment, created by Runde and Flanagan:

“Hot Buttons are those situations or behaviors that can upset individuals enough to cause them to overreact in destructive ways.”

In other words, Hot Buttons are what activate our fight/flight instincts; they are what cause us to act (and react) as if we already were embroiled in conflict – even when we are not.

Have you ever said something to someone who took it the “wrong way” and surprised you with how defensive they suddenly became? Without intending to, you likely triggered one of their Hot Buttons. Without intending to, they reacted defensively, as if threatened. (It’s important to realize that whenever someone’s Hot Button gets pushed, it more than likely happens unintentionally. Nevertheless, the person’s [over]reaction is strong and immediate.)

The CDP assessment identifies the power that certain attitudes and behaviors of others have to frustrate, frighten, irritate, and/or automatically trigger us into conflict. The nine most common descriptors of people who push our Hot Buttons are:

◆ **Unreliable**

That is, when we have to deal with people who “miss deadlines and cannot be counted on.”

◆ **Overly Analytical**

That is, when we have to deal with people who “are perfectionists, overanalyze things, and focus too much on minor issues.”

◆ **Unappreciative**

That is, when we have to deal with people who “fail to give credit to others and seldom praise good performance.”

◆ **Aloof**

That is, when we have to deal with people who “isolate themselves, do not seek input from others, or are hard to approach.”

◆ **Micro-Managing**

That is, when we have to deal with people who “constantly monitor and check up on the work being done.”

◆ **Self-Centered**

That is, when we have to deal with people who “believe they are always correct.”

◆ **Abrasive**

That is, when we have to deal with people who “are arrogant, sarcastic, and generally rude.”

◆ **Untrustworthy**

That is, when we have to deal with people who “exploit others, take undeserved credit, or cannot be trusted.”

◆ **Hostile**

That is, when we have to deal with people who “lose their temper, become angry, or yell at others.”

As you read through this list, some items likely didn’t bother you much at all. But some, if you’re being honest with yourself, likely created a definite emotional twinge in you.

Having your Hot Buttons pushed starts innocently enough:

- ◆ Someone wants to talk with you about something.
- ◆ But they raise, or discuss, the issue in a way that unintentionally triggers one of your Hot Buttons.
- ◆ That it was unintentional matters not; you overreact, and in doing so,

unintentionally trigger one of the other person’s Hot Buttons.

- ◆ You both now are triggered, but it doesn’t stop there because the other person just (over) reacted in a way that triggered you all over again.
  - ◆ You, now, triggered and re-triggered in a matter of just moments, (over) react in a way that re-triggers the trigger-er.
  - ◆ Tensions (and exasperations) peak for you both, individually, and collectively.
  - ◆ And any ability for either of you to engage in a meaningful or constructive conversation about ... what was it about, again? ... is long gone.
- Or maybe it works the other way round:
- ◆ You want to talk with someone about something.
  - ◆ But you raise, or discuss, the issue in a way that unintentionally triggers one of their Hot Buttons.
  - ◆ That it was unintentional matters not; they overreact, and in doing so, unintentionally triggers one of your Hot Buttons.
  - ◆ You both now are triggered, but it doesn’t stop there because you just (over) reacted in a way that triggered the other person all over again.
  - ◆ The other person, now, triggered and re-triggered in a matter of just moments, (over) react in a way that re-triggers the trigger-er.
  - ◆ Tensions (and exasperations) peak for you both, individually, and collectively.
  - ◆ And any ability for either of you to engage in a meaningful or constructive conversation about ... what was it about, again? ... is long gone.

Interestingly, neither you, nor the other person, had any intention of, or interest in, causing a conflict of this

magnitude. Yet the mayhem that ensued created a definite conflict.

Is there no way out? Actually, there is. By getting more “consciously aware” of your own (and other people’s) Hot Buttons, you can far more competently avoid this whole triggers-triggering-triggers thing and work, in true partnership on the more substantive issues at hand.

**Becoming More Conflict Competent**

Once engaged in conflict, regardless of what got you there, or the style you’re using to respond to it, our conflict competence gets put to the test.

The key is to maximize our Constructive Responses to Conflict (a specific set of behaviors known to keep conflict to a minimum) and minimize our Destructive Responses to Conflict (a specific set of different behaviors that are known to escalate, or prolong conflict), across both Active and Passive dimensions.

Let’s take a quick look at each of these CDP dimensions: (See Exhibit II)

◆ **Active-Constructive Responses**

With these responses, individuals take some sort of “overt response to the conflict or provocation and as a result there is a beneficial effect on the course of the conflict.”

- **Perspective Taking**  
Responding to conflict by putting yourself in the other person’s position and trying to understand that person’s point of view.
- **Creating Solutions**  
Responding to conflict by brainstorming with the other person, asking questions, and trying to create solutions to the problem.

Exhibit II: Conflict Response Categories Style

	Constructive Responses	Destructive Responses
Active Responses	Perspective Taking Creating Solutions Expressing Emotions Reaching Out	Winning at All Costs Displaying Anger Demeaning Others Retaliating
Passive Responses	Reflective Thinking Delay Responding Adapting	Avoiding Yielding Hiding Emotions Self-Criticizing

© Conflict Dynamic Profile

• **Reaching Out**

Responding to conflict by reaching out to the other person, making the first move, and trying to make amends.

• **Expressing Emotions**

Responding to conflict by talking honestly with the other person and expressing your thoughts and feelings.

◆ **Passive-Constructive Responses**

These responses “consist largely of the decision to refrain from some act [or to consider possible actions privately, instead] – and as a result there is a beneficial effect on the course of the conflict. The use of such responses make it less likely that the episode will develop into an emotional conflict.”

• **Reflective Thinking**

Responding to conflict by analyzing the situation, weighing the pros and cons, and thinking about the best response.

• **Delay Responding**

Responding to conflict by waiting things out, letting matters settle down, or taking a “time out” when emotions are running high.

• **Adapting**

Responding to conflict by staying flexible, and trying to make the best of the situation.

◆ **Active-Destructive Responses**

These responses, involve individuals taking some sort of “overt response to the conflict or provocation but doing so has a negative, destructive effect on the course of conflict. The use of such responses make it more likely that the episode will take the form of an emotional conflict.”

• **Winning at All Costs**

Responding to conflict by arguing vigorously for your own position and trying to win at all costs.

• **Displaying Anger**

Responding to conflict by expressing anger, raising your voice, and using harsh, angry words.

• **Demeaning Others**

Responding to conflict by laughing at the other person, ridiculing the other’s ideas, and using sarcasm.

• **Retaliating**

Responding to conflict by obstructing the other person, retaliating against the other, and trying to get revenge.

◆ **Passive-Destructive Responses**

These responses are those in which “the individual responds to the precipitating event in a less active way, or fails to act in some way. As a result, the conflict is not resolved, or is resolved in an unsatisfactory manner.”

• **Avoiding**

Responding to conflict by avoiding or ignoring the other person, and acting distant and aloof.

• **Yielding**

Responding to conflict by giving in to the other person in order to avoid further conflict.

• **Hiding Emotions**

Responding to conflict by concealing your true emotions even though feeling upset.

• **Self-Criticizing**

Responding to conflict by replaying the incident over in your mind, and criticizing yourself for not handling it better.

Again, the more capable we are at maximizing our Constructive Responses to conflict and minimizing our Destructive Responses to conflict, across both Active and Passive dimensions, the more conflict competent we will be.

**Increased Conflict Competency is the Goal**

Being able to engage naturally, easily, respectfully, and constructively in the midst of a conflict is something we all can learn – and is something that can serve us all well, once learned.

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