

## CONFLICT MANAGEMENT STYLE EXPLORATION

Before this exercise can begin, students need to complete a style assessment such as the Thomas – Kilmann or the assessment contained in an appendix to Bargaining for Advantage by Richard Shell. If you have time, the students enjoy getting into small groups to discuss their own conflict management or negotiation styles, followed by larger group sharing and discussion of the learning/reports from the small groups. The full class discussion is richer after small group discussion.

Since the “collaborative” style is more “learned” and “conscious” rather than instinctual and because many negotiation classes are teaching the meaning of collaboration throughout the course, I usually leave this style out when forming the small discussion groups. The students tend to have more need for learning and development of emotional intelligence around the other four styles. In forming the small groups, ask students to identify their top score (other than collaboration). If collaboration is their top score, they should ignore it and move to the next highest score. If they have a tie, ask them to pick the style that they intuitively feel comes up more for them or that they would like to discuss in a small group. I sometimes move students around to their second highest scoring style if one of the groups is lacking sufficient numbers for discussion.

Take care to preface the exercise and discussions with an acknowledgment that we can all utilize a variety of styles in different moments and with different people. However, most of us have one or two that are more familiar or predominant or the mode we fall into when in conflict or under stress. It is fun to ask the students to cross their arms physically. Wait until all have their arms crossed. Then, ask them to recross their arms the other way. Notice how most of them struggle with this, and offer commentary that we are similar with our conflict management styles. We can use the other styles but we tend to feel more comfortable with one or two styles we move into naturally, just as we cross our arms naturally one way rather than the other.

After identifying each student’s top score style, organize the students in small groups with others of the same style. Ask them to generate and record answers to a list of questions about their style which they will then share with the large group upon return. This takes about 15 – 20 minutes. My favorite questions include the following:

1. What are the strengths and weaknesses of this style, or advantages and disadvantages?
2. When is it more or less appropriate to use this style?
3. What motivates this style? In other words, why do you do what you do?

4. In light of the previous answers, what advice would you give to others (mediators or negotiators) for working with your style? (e.g. if you are a competitor, what advice would you give to someone else for dealing with a competitive negotiator such as yourself).

The instructor should facilitate and weave commentary into the reports provided by the small groups to ensure that everyone gets the full picture. It often creates more room for humor and honesty if the instructor notes that each style has an effective and an ineffective version, or a “tempered” and an “untempered” version, and each has its “learning edges.”

One of the greatest areas for development of emotional intelligence for each person lies in identifying their learning edge so that they can avoid the pitfalls of the style while maximizing the advantages. Another critical area for learning comes from understanding the motivation of a style. The motivations generally emerge in the discussion of strengths, but it is helpful to briefly isolate this as a separate question for focus. Once you understand why a style operates as it does, you have clues that will help you “speak the language” or operate “on the channel” of that style. It is also fun to talk about certain interesting combinations such as the competitor and the avoider – and who has the power in that pairing. I also like to note that most of us tend to project our own style onto others, with potentially poor results.

Below are some of the comments that may come out or should be drawn out regarding the four styles:

### **Competitors**

#### Strengths

Tempered competitors may be a wonderful leaders and organizers. They know how to clearly define and plan movement toward achievement of goals and can motivate others around them. They tend to be clear, decisive, fast paced and well prepared. They are good at setting and attaining high aspirations with respect to the transactional aspects of a negotiation. They are often good communicators.

#### Weaknesses

Untempered competitors can be overly goal focused, positional, too certain that they are “right,” unwilling to consider input of others or in too much of a rush to hear what others are saying. They can be too heavily focused on transaction and assertion and frame the negotiation in win/lose terms, missing opportunities for collaboration and joint gain. A nickname for the ineffective competitor is the “tank” – the person who is driving toward goal and running over the people in the process. Damage

to relationship is frequently mentioned as the critical price paid by the untempered competitor. When the competitor projects and assumes that others are equally competitive, and therefore engages with others in a suspicious and guarded manner, there is a tendency for this to become a self-fulfilling prophecy, creating an adversarial environment.

The key “learning edge” for competitors is to remember to slow down, listen and bring the people along with them to avoid damage to relationships, and consider that there may be other valid ideas for satisfying everyone’s interests in the negotiation.

#### More/Less Appropriate

A competitive approach is more appropriate when the negotiation is primarily focused on transaction, particularly when it is high stakes and/or a “one time” deal, with no anticipated future relationship. It is also more appropriate when decisions need to be made quickly, when “buy in” from others is less important, when facing other competitors, when operating from a position of relative power and/or when the negotiator has a strong BATNA and can better risk the possibility of an unsuccessful negotiation. However, even in these situations, the competitor is well advised to use the effective version of the style.

A competitive approach is less appropriate when relationship is of primary importance and further dealings are anticipated and/or desired. It is also less appropriate when the stakes are low, when “buy in” from others is important, when more creative solutions are possible if addressed at the interest level, when BATNA is weak and/or the negotiator is in a position of lesser power.

#### What motivates the style?

Competitors are generally driven by achievement of **goals** or **winning**, and their ego or self-esteem is often tied to these achievements.

#### Advice for Negotiating with this style?

You are speaking a competitor’s language when you acknowledge the importance of their goals and praise their efforts and leadership in working towards outcomes. A competitor will also tend to like and respect you more when you are well prepared, efficient, quick paced and organized. When competitors stray into “tank” mode, you may want to give them a gentle reminder that it is in their self-interest to slow down and remember the importance of relationship. Most competitors appreciate this because they do care about relationship, but can sometimes lose sight of it in the drive towards goal. You can assure them that small detours and taking time to listen carefully will better outcomes in the long run.

## **Compromisers**

### Strengths

Effective compromisers are reasonable, balanced and naturally inclined to want outcomes that at least partially satisfy the needs of all participants in a negotiation. They know how to achieve outcomes relatively quickly and efficiently as they focus on the middle ground as a place that tends to feel fair. They are careful to maintain an environment of mutual respect and reciprocity, with an expectation of give and take. They say that they like outcomes where “everyone gets something.” Relationships tend to stay healthy when compromisers are working effectively.

Compromisers sometimes report that they can be “taken advantage of,” but I note that this will usually only happen once. When a compromiser makes a concession and does not receive reciprocity, the compromiser is typically firm about refusing to continue negotiating with the counterpart who is perceived to be attempting to take advantage. In this sense, the compromiser has good “backbone” in a negotiation.

### Weaknesses

Ineffective compromisers are overly convinced that the one correct and “fair” way to negotiate is almost always their way, focusing on the middle ground, with equality of concessions, usually at the position rather than the interest level. They are too rigid in their approach and less able to shift to other styles when other styles might be more appropriate. For example, they might be too quick to cede their own interests to get to the middle ground when the stakes were high and they should have been more competitive. Or they may be too insistent on the middle ground when the stakes were of little importance and they might have been accommodating. Or they may lose sight of the possibility that they could have taken more time and made more effort to expand the pie and create more value for all rather than automatically going to the 50/50 positional solution. The downside of compromise is that “everyone gives up something,” or everyone ends up “equally unhappy.”

The danger when compromisers project their style onto others is that they tend to assume that others will begin a negotiation from an equally “reasonable” position, already close to or at the middle ground. When that is not true, the ineffective compromiser may find themselves, ironically, in a position where they are not perceived as reasonable because they have left themselves little or no room for concessions. They do not get credit for the concessions they made mentally, which were not visible to the counterpart negotiator.

The critical learning edge for compromisers is to watch out for blind focus on “50/50” or “equal” mentality as the definition of fairness. Equal is not always “fair” and flexibility of approach can sometimes lead to better

outcomes. They also need to watch out for jumping to the middle ground too quickly in some circumstances.

When is this style more or less appropriate?

When quick, efficient results are needed, the compromiser style is often recommended. It is reported to be the most frequently used style in situations of ongoing relationship, whether in business or at home, because it tends to feel fair and avoids straining relationships through lengthy discussion or haggling. It is less appropriate when there is good potential for more collaborative, maximizing results or when facing an aggressive competitor.

What motivates this style?

The key word that emerges in the discussion above is “fairness” and the compromiser’s self-esteem is usually tied to being seen as fair and reasonable. The definition of fairness typically used by compromisers is that of equality rather than a needs based or equity based definition. For example, if negotiating the division of an apple pie, their instinct would be to suggest equal shares for all participants. Their first instinct would not be to suggest division of the pie based upon who was most hungry or in need of food, nor would they tend to analyze who deserved more pie based upon who made the greatest investment in buying the ingredients or putting the pie together.

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Advice for negotiating with this style?

You are speaking a compromiser’s language when you talk about and demonstrate fairness, equality, reciprocity, give and take etc. A compromiser will like and respect you more when you demonstrate that you are considering both sides’ interests and seeking a “reasonable,” solution in the middle ground. You may sometimes need to give a compromiser a gentle reminder that fair is not always equal and that it may be worth taking time to explore deeper interests and seek a solution that maximizes rather than settling so quickly for 50/50. Compromisers are willing to entertain other definitions of fairness and explore other outcomes when they see or are reminded of the benefits.

## **Accommodators**

### Strengths

Effective accommodators are generally very good listeners and group harmonizers. They care deeply about the interests of others and are good at discovering what those interests might be. They know how to promote cooperation and place a high value on maintaining positive relationships. They report that they minimize conflict around them, which is generally true as they tend not to assert their own interests when contrary to others. When they are doing this appropriately, they are

making themselves happy by satisfying one of their own top priority interests as they make others around them happy.

### Weaknesses

Untempered accommodators over prioritize the needs of others at the expense of their own. A nickname suggested for the ineffective accommodator is “doormat.” They are too reluctant to assert their own interests and lose sight of the balance between making others happy and taking care of themselves or asking that others reciprocate their efforts. Ironically, sometimes relationships are less healthy in this situation because others lose respect for the doormat accommodator.

A critical danger for the overaccommodator is the build up of resentment. When accommodators project their style onto others, as they frequently do, they assume that others will notice and reciprocate all of their good deeds. They believe others will or should praise them for being such wonderful people and/or return the favors in equal measure. Most accommodators admit that this tends to be an unspoken expectation. When their efforts are not appreciated or reciprocated, most accommodators report that resentment may build up over time to the point that they “hit the wall.” At that point, all bets are off and the accommodator is likely to shift into extreme competition or avoidance, breaking off or seriously damaging relationship.

The critical learning edge for many accommodators is to pay closer attention to maintaining a healthy balance between taking care of their own needs and the needs of others. They also benefit from working to be appropriately assertive, reminding themselves that being assertive does not equate with being aggressive or inappropriate and does not have to damage relationship. The accommodator also benefits from making their message of expected appreciation and reciprocity spoken, so that others are on notice of their expectations and can respond appropriately.

### When is this style more or less appropriate?

When the relationship is of maximal importance and transactional issues are few or of minimal importance, accommodation can be a good choice, as long as it remains in balance. It is also appropriate when others are known to be equally concerned about the accommodator’s interests and can be trusted to appreciate and reciprocate the accommodator’s efforts. When stakes are high, transaction is paramount and/or others cannot be trusted to be concerned about the accommodator’s interests, this style is less appropriate

### What motivates this style?

The theme that emerges from the discussion above is the accommodator’s desire to be liked and maintain positive relationships and

harmony around them. It is not unusual for some people to score high in both accommodation and avoidance, which sometimes leads to accommodators reporting that a key motive is to avoid conflict. This is partially accurate, but most accommodators report that the predominant theme for this style is “liking.”

#### Advice for negotiating with this style?

Some jokingly suggest that one should simply take advantage of the accommodator in a negotiation. However, there is clearly a danger in this suggestion when we consider the possibility that this might cause an accommodator to “hit the wall” and completely derail the negotiation or attempt to renege on a negotiated agreement that was too one-sided. You will be speaking the accommodator’s language and feeding their self-esteem when you praise and appreciate them for their skills as listeners, harmonizers and givers. You will also maintain a healthier relationship with an accommodator when you are careful to reciprocate by giving back to them, even when they do not seem to be asking for or expecting this. Remember that they are reluctant to assert their needs because they fear you may not like them if they do so, which means you may need to work harder to draw out their interests. You may be more successful with this if you reassure them that you will like and respect them just as much if they tell you what matters to them, or remind them that it is difficult to be a mindreader if they do not make their expectations known to you.

### **Avoiders**

#### Strengths

Effective avoiders are generally “strategic” avoiders who consciously choose this style in the right circumstances or as a temporary measure. For example, it can be a wise strategy to temporarily avoid a negotiation while tempers cool to a manageable level, or while gathering information and building leverage so as to ultimately engage in the negotiation more effectively. Temporary avoidance can also be used to build anxiety and urgency to make a deal on the other side or as a matter of picking the ideal moment for the negotiation. Effective avoiders report that they are good at “picking their battles,” and knowing when a situation can be left to resolve by itself without “stirring the pot” and creating unnecessary tension. They suggest that there is no need to “make a mountain out of a molehill.” They also wisely avoid when there is nothing to be gained, or even exposure to risk, by engaging in a negotiation. When they are correctly assessing these situations, their choices are well made.

#### Weaknesses

The ineffective avoider is more of a kneejerk or permanent avoider, or one who regularly convinces himself that the situation will resolve itself when

that is not the case. These avoiders are generally uncomfortable with conflict and associate most negotiation with conflict. They tend to convince themselves that mountains look like molehills and fail to see when molehills are growing into mountains. The problems that arise are that situations fester, decisions are not made when needed and resentment often builds around the ineffective avoider as people become frustrated with their inability to get things done without the avoider's cooperation. These avoiders may be seen as apathetic, unmotivated or sometimes even as passive aggressive when the avoider takes independent action without negotiating with others. Interestingly, the ineffective avoider may not anticipate such resentment because they tend to project their style onto others, assuming that others are equally comfortable waiting for situations to resolve without intervention. Avoiders may also be unaware that the resentment that builds is often as a result of others (particularly competitors) feeling "powerless" to force the avoider to engage.

The key learning edge for avoiders is to develop better awareness and consciousness around the choice to avoid, making sure it is warranted rather than coming from wishful thinking. They should monitor situations to ensure that others see them as appropriately responsive and they may sometimes need to remind themselves that it is better to deal with a problem while it is still a molehill rather than a mountain. They should also remind themselves that their desire to prevent conflicts that may damage relationships can end up being just as damaging to relationships if they are generating resentment. Avoiders should be more aware that their choice to avoid can be seen as a "power move," even though they may tend to perceive themselves as less powerful in some ways.

When is this style more or less appropriate?

The answer to this question tends to emerge in the discussion of effective, temporary and strategic avoidance. For example, it is wise to avoid temporarily to ensure one is adequately prepared at the time of a negotiation or permanently when there is nothing to be gained in a negotiation. It is less appropriate when matters need to be addressed, time is of the essence, the avoider will lose respect or relationship with those who resent the lack of engagement, etc.

What motivates this style?

The key to a great deal of avoidance, particularly when it is non-strategic, is some sort of fear or discomfort with conflict and a tendency to believe negotiations will escalate into something unpleasant and damaging to relationship. As with the accommodator, there is a concern about relationship, but this style tends to be more fundamentally about discomfort than liking.



### Advice for negotiation with this style?

If you understand the avoider's discomfort, you know that it is essential to make an avoider feel safe in a negotiation. A fast paced, aggressive, competitive style is clearly dangerous in combination with an avoider as it is likely to cause the avoider to want to avoid. An avoider will be much more comfortable if it is understood that the negotiation will have a measured pace with respectful communication and clear guidelines for cooperation. Avoiders may also benefit from a gentle reminder that it is worth it to engage and overcome their discomfort either because the situation is serious or on it's way to becoming serious, and it will be more manageable now than later and may prevent worse conflict in the long run.

