

## Chapter 9

# Conflict

### This chapter focuses on

- understanding personal and cultural attitudes towards conflict
- approaches to preventing conflict
- approaches to resolving conflict
- identifying best practices for dealing with conflict across cultures



# Personal attitudes towards conflict | 9.1

One person’s conflict is another person’s debate. In other words, what people see as a conflict can vary enormously. In this chapter, we mean by conflict a breakdown in a working relationship caused by one or more people feeling strongly about an event or an ongoing situation. An event could be a meeting in which someone speaks rudely or it could be a failure to do a piece of work that had been agreed on. An ongoing situation could be a lack of support in a demanding role. These events or situations upset us and engage our emotions. We can feel anger, hatred, resentment or jealousy.

If we do not address the cause of the conflict, the feelings could go away – our emotions could gradually diminish. Or they could remain, slowly eating away at our motivation, enjoyment and performance.

### Avoiding conflict

Some people are very skilled at disguising their feelings so it is difficult to see that there is a breakdown in the relationship. Many people do not want to face a conflict – the thought of bringing the conflict into the open is even worse than continuing to suffer from it. Maybe their experience is that trying to resolve the conflict can be more damaging than pretending everything is okay. This conclusion may be based on other conflicts they have experienced or on their lack of skill in dealing with conflict.

### Facing conflict

Other people believe it is always better to face a conflict and try to resolve it. While the conflict is there, they cannot work or concentrate up to their usual standard. It robs them of their motivation and focus. Even if they may know that it will be difficult or even impossible to resolve the conflict, they try to achieve this because they feel it is better than doing nothing. Unfortunately if they try without the necessary skill, it may be difficult for them to resolve the conflict. In fact, they could make it worse.

### What is your attitude towards conflict?

A colleague arrives late. You are going to miss a travel connection. You feel she has been selfish – she should have called you to keep you informed.

#### Do you criticise her for being late?

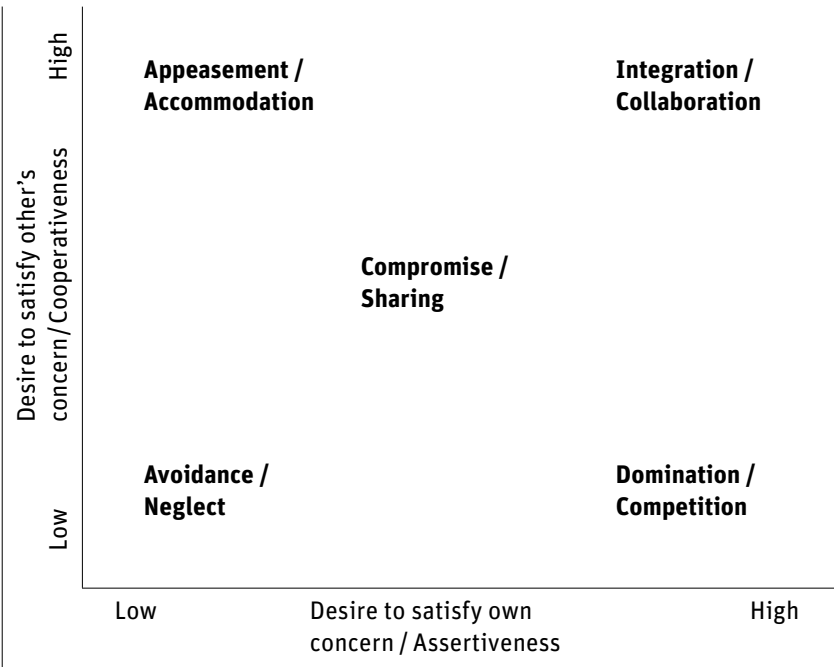
One of your colleagues in the team is always dominating meetings. You have some really good ideas but you find it difficult to get them heard. You wish the project leader would shut him up. However, you don’t believe this will happen.

#### Do you raise the issue with the dominating colleague?

Your boss shows favouritism towards a colleague. He gives her a lot of attention and also the most interesting jobs to do. You feel undervalued and more and more resentful.

#### Do you raise this issue with your boss or someone else or not at all?

Different orientations to conflict are pictured in the grid below. At the heart of this picture of orientations to conflict is the question: Are you more interested in satisfying your own interests (self-centred) or those of the other party (other-centred)?



Thomas's 'grid' framework of conflict management orientations  
Adapted from Thomas (1976) and Spencer-Oatey and Franklin (forthcoming)

If you have no desire to give in to the other party to the conflict but if you are also not interested in settling the conflict in your own interest, you will be located in the bottom left-hand corner (avoidance).

If you are prepared to give up and satisfy the other party at the expense of yourself, you can be found in the top left-hand corner (appeasement / accommodation).

Domination / competition (bottom right-hand corner) is an orientation in which parties to conflict seeks to get their own way at all costs. Integration (top right-hand corner) seeks to satisfy both parties by applying a problem-solving approach.

### How do you prefer to manage conflict? Locate your preferred orientation on the grid.

Most people have a hierarchy of orientations and choose the preferred approach depending on the particular conflict. This hierarchy may be influenced by culturally based preferences.