

# WHEN IT COMES TO CONFLICT: strategies for addressing incompatible concerns

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## What is the right response to conflict?

The answer is: *it depends*. It depends on the situation, your skills, and your comfort with the situation. There is no one “right” answer. Conflict presents a challenge usually centered around “incompatible concerns”. When it appears that you and the other person can’t both have your needs or desires met conflict inevitably arises. Often these concerns appear to share very little common ground, making the situation seem as though you are at a dead end. In these situations you can choose to satisfy your needs or to satisfy the needs of the other party—the mix of your behaviors determines five conflict styles. Behaviors can be mapped along two continuums of “assertiveness” and “cooperativeness”. When you choose to interact with others in a way that is unassertive and uncooperative, you will end up engaging in behaviors that are called AVOIDING. At the other end of the spectrum, behaviors that are highly assertive and highly cooperative fall into the category called “COLLABORATING”.

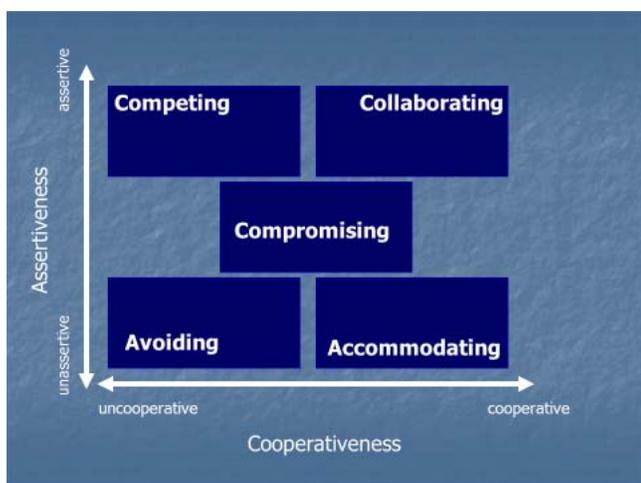
These styles are common—examples happen daily.

When you fall into a competing mode, you are pursuing your own concerns at the other’s expense. The motto of this mode is “might makes right”. This is a power-oriented mode and when strong, can involve whatever power seems appropriate to win. We see this manifested in the world when people argue, rank outcomes or candidates, or implement economic sanctions against another country or group. Remember that competing can mean simply trying to win, it can also mean standing up for your rights or defending a position you believe in.

When you are highly cooperative but unassertive you fall into an accommodating mode. If this mode had a catchphrase, it would be “kill your enemies with kindness” because in this mode you are neglecting your own concerns to satisfy the concerns of others, bringing in some element of self-sacrifice. When people yield to others, give to charity, or yield to another’s point of view or even follow orders when they would prefer not to, they are engaging in accommodating behavior.

Avoiding behavior is about not pursuing either your own or the other party’s concerns and could be called “leave well enough alone”. We do this when we diplomatically side step an issue, postpone an issue until a better time, or simply withdraw from a threatening situation.

Collaborating is when you try to work with another to find a solution that fully satisfies the concerns of both parties. It involves digging into an issue to identify the underlying concerns and find an alternative that meets both sets of concerns. This happens when we explore a disagreement to learn from each other’s insights, when we resolve some condition that otherwise keeps us competing for resources, or confronting and trying to find a creative solution to an interpersonal problem. If it had a motto, it would shout out “two heads are better than one!”



Finally, Compromising happens when you try to find an expedient solution that partially satisfies both parties. Everyone at the table gives up more than when in the competing mode, but less than when in the accommodating mode. Both process and solution address the issues more directly than avoiding but in less depth than collaborating. You can see compromising when people split the difference, exchange concessions, or simply find a quick middle ground.

## ***What are you good at?***

Well, that depends partly on what you practice and partly on what you prefer and partly on the situation itself. There are no easy, simple, cut-and-dried answers to conflict. Conflict is complex. You can use any of the five styles and typically people use some mix of all of them, or at least four of the five. It is common for individuals to have one or two favorites they like to use and fall back on often, whether those are appropriate for the situation or not. What you practice, intentionally, mindfully, will have a strong impact on your skill level and thus your comfort with that style.

## ***Which road to follow in a conflict situation***

How do you know when to pull each strategy out of your proverbial hat to face a conflict situation? Assuming you are somewhat comfortable in each strategy, there is a way to assess the situation and to match what an appropriate response is likely to be.

For example, when quick and decisive action is vital, such as in an emergency situation, it's probably time to use a competing type of response. This also makes sense when important issues which are unpopular or specific courses of action need to be implemented, like cost-cutting procedures, enforcing unpopular rules, or enacting discipline. Competing can also be a key strategy when you are faced with issues vital to your organization's welfare or when you know you are right. Your own ability to engage in competing behaviors and to focus on satisfying your own needs becomes particularly important when you need to protect yourself against people who take advantage of you or of noncompetitive behavior.

Accommodating is a good strategy to fall back on when you realize that you were wrong. It can help you allow for a better position to be considered, to learn from others, and to demonstrate to others that you are reasonable.

Accommodating also makes sense when the issue is much more important to the other person than it is to you—that gesture of goodwill can help to build the relationship and build up social credits that can prove useful in the future. When you need to preserve harmony and prevent disruption, accommodating is a key strategy. There are also times when continued competition is only going to damage your cause, like when you are outmatched and losing. On a happier note, you are accommodating when you step out of the way so others on your team can learn and develop from opportunities.

Avoiding has its usefulness as well, such as when an issue is trivial or of passing importance, or when other issues are more pressing. If there is no chance of satisfying your concerns, perhaps when you have little power or when the change is very difficult, avoiding can have merit. You might think of situations when national policies are at play or when you can't change the personality of another person. Avoiding always makes sense when the costs of confrontation outweigh the benefits of resolution or when people need some time to calm down to regain their perspective and composure. It also helps to allow for those involved to gather more information rather than jumping into an immediate decision. Of course, when others can resolve the situation more effectively than you can is a good time to step aside. And finally, avoiding the situation is called for when it's really another issue at play which needs to be addressed.

Collaborating makes sense when you have time and lots of it. Then you can find an integrative solution, particularly vital when the concerns of both parties are too important to be compromised. It's also useful when your objective is to learn more about the views of others or even about your own assumptions. Collaborating helps gain commitment from people with different perspectives on a problem or who need to work through hard feelings that have been interfering with an interpersonal relationship.

When the goals are moderately important but not worth the potential disruption involved by using the other conflict modes, then it is the time to try compromising. When all parties at the table have equal power and are strongly committed to mutually exclusive goals, such as in labor-management bargaining, this becomes a strategy of choice. It provides a way to arrive at an expedient solution under time pressure and serves as a backup mode when other strategies fail.