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Effective Communication Strategies for Dealing with Difficult Clients

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Course Objectives:

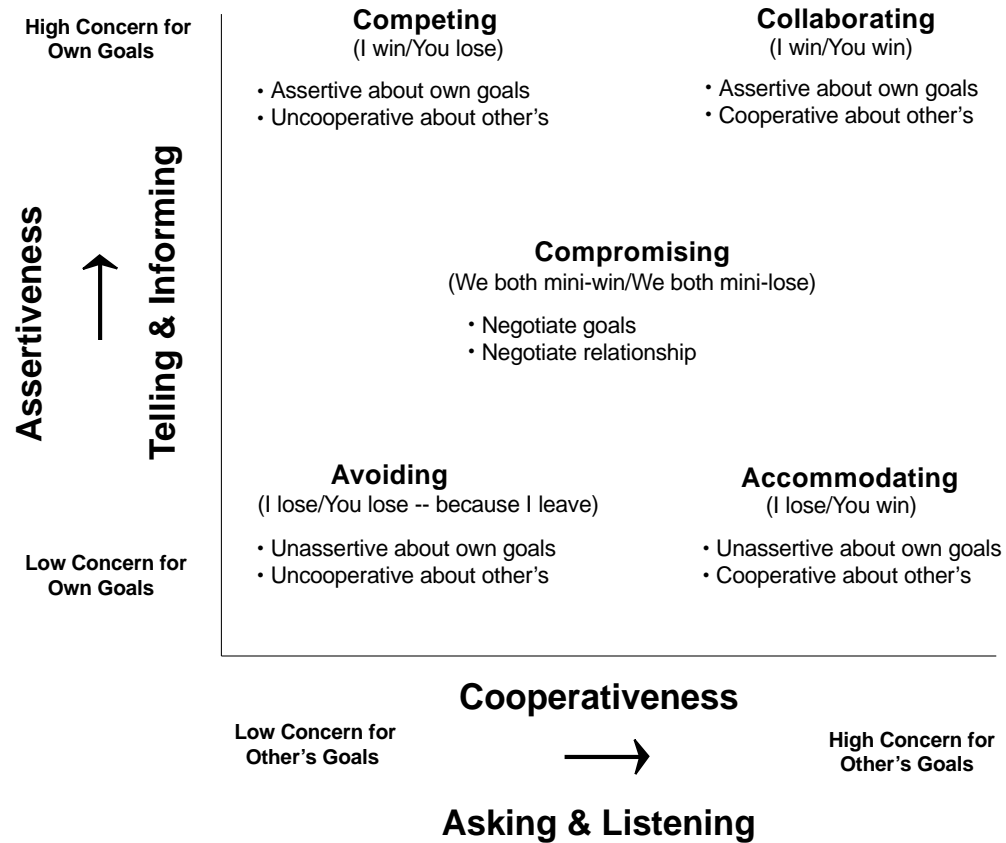
- **Develop an understanding of various conflict handling modes (including your own) under stress.**
- **Learn to reframe your perspectives about conflict as the first step to effectively engage in conflict.**
- **Learn four principles of mediation to apply to conflict situations.**
- **Learn a four-step strategy to address conflicts in a balanced and respectful manner and apply it to a case scenario.**

Definition of Conflict

- **In the workplace, conflict arises from a clash of perceptions, goals, or values in an arena where people care about the outcome.**
- **The breeding ground for conflict may lie in confusion about or disagreement with the common purpose and how to achieve it while also achieving individual goals within an organization.**
- **Unaddressed conflict often escalates, leading to poor outcomes: job dissatisfaction, employee turnover, reduced productivity and other costly consequences.**

The Five Conflict Styles

Your conflict style is characterized by the degree to which you are concerned about achieving your own goal and are concerned about the other achieving her or his goals.



What is your conflict management style, particularly under stress?

- **Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument**
- **Professors Kenneth Thomas and Ralph Kilmann at the U. of Pittsburgh**
- **Leading standardized assessment tool to assess conflict handling mode**
- **Five conflict response styles:**
 - Avoiding
 - Accommodating
 - Competing
 - Compromising
 - Collaborating

Conflict Styles

- **Question: Which style is best for you to use?**
- **Answer: It depends. . . .**

Best Practice

- **Given the role and responsibilities of the manager, and your (advisory) role, it is best to use a collaborative approach:**
 - Perception of conflict: a problem to be solved
 - Perception of others: allies to enlist in finding a creative solution
 - Guiding principle: belief in the power of consensus—and in sharing information and understandings
 - Values: innovation, open-mindedness, learning, consensus, win-win solutions

Scenario: “Presenting Audit Results to Clients”

Audit projects typically take from 150 to 400 hours to complete. An auditor has spent time reviewing a department’s procedures and practices for handling financial activities and has identified three observations which he feels need to be presented in an audit report. Of the three areas, two of the areas involve compliance with University policy and the last area involves an inefficiency in how business is conducted. Before writing the report, the auditor meets with the department’s business manager to discuss the observations.

Scenario: “Presenting Audit Results to Clients” *continued*

He presents the compliance observations to the manager and the manager immediately tells the auditor that his department is complying with UC policy. The auditor attempts to explain what he has found but the manager insists that there is no problem in that area. The auditor continues to press and tries to show the manager evidence of non-compliance and the manager insists that this is an isolated case and the auditor is trying to take a minor matter and make it into a major problem.

Scenario: “Presenting Audit Results to Clients” *continued*

The auditor then tries to explain the inefficiency he has found in the department’s operation. He has found that cash collections are taking two weeks to be deposited with the University’s cashier office. The auditor has found that part of the reason for the delay is the process followed in processing cash. As he starts to present his case to the manager, he is told that he is not qualified to advise the business manager on how his operation should be run.

Scenario: “Presenting Audit Results to Clients” *continued*

The auditor attempts to explain the inefficiencies in the process and is told that University policy requires the department to process cash collections in this manner. When the auditor tells the manager that policy does not require the inefficient processes, the business manager pulls out a memo dated January 15, 1999 from the cashier’s office requiring cash to be processed in this manner.

Contemporary View of Workplace Conflict

- **Conflict is normal, natural and inevitable.**
- **The productive or unproductive outcomes from conflict will be largely determined by how it is handled.**
- **On an individual level, conflict competence promotes well-being and confidence through mindful practice.**
- **On an organizational level, if managed well, conflict can result in improved productivity and innovation.**
- ***Both individuals and organizations can change to learn productive conflict competence.***

What causes the conflict in these scenarios?

- **Lack of clarity regarding roles and responsibilities.**
- **“Different perspectives” about the relative need to initiate changes to comply with policy or to improve operations, based on “different facts”.**
- **“Auditor” title may feel threatening to client, whereas auditor sees self as potential ally.**

What causes the conflict in these scenarios? *continued*

- To the client, audit process may represent an interruption in work with consequences of lost time and other resources; yet the auditor feels a lack of recognition and appreciation for the 150-400 hours worked on the client's behalf.
- Client may also fear actual (e.g., audit used during performance review) or perceived adverse consequences as a result of findings; auditor also has concerns about adverse consequences but is "killed as the messenger".
- *Change is difficult.*

How to effectively handle the conflict using four principles of mediation

- **“Win-win” outcomes**
- **Face-saving approach**
- **Balance of interests**
- ***Effective interpersonal communication skills**

Effective communication skills in conflict situations recognize five primal needs of “difficult” people

- 1. Don't make me wrong even if you disagree.**
- 2. Acknowledge the positive within me.**
- 3. Let me know that you understand me.**
- 4. Look for my honorable intentions.**
- 5. Tell me the truth with thoughtfulness.**

Four-step strategy for effective communication (CARP)

- C: Control**—Control your emotions by developing self-regulating techniques, especially if you are inclined toward fight (competitive) or flight (avoidance) responses in the face of conflict. If you want to manage conflict, you have to manage emotions.
- A: Acknowledge**—Acknowledge the client’s position so s/he feels heard, by summarizing their perspective. Allow client to explain their position and “actively listen” without interrupting.
- R: Refocus**—Refocus on the presenting issue by reframing the problem using neutral, non-defensive language. Present your facts in a nonthreatening manner. Be open to further response from the client which will allow you to move to problem-solving.
- P: Problem-solve**—Problem-solve by proposing a collaborative method to solve the problem. Present your role as an ally to assist client with meeting shared goal of compliance with University policies.

Return to scenario: “Presenting Audit Results to Clients”

- **Before writing the report, the auditor meets with the department’s business manager to discuss the observations.**
- **He presents the compliance observations to the manager and manager immediately tells the auditor that his department is complying with UC policy.**
- **The auditor attempts to explain what he has found but the manager insists that there is no problem in that area.**
- **The auditor continues to press and tries to show the manager evidence of non-compliance and the manager insists that this is an isolated case and the auditor is trying to take a minor matter and make it into a major problem.**

Return to scenario: “Presenting Audit Results to Clients”

- **The auditor then tries to explain the inefficiency he has found in the department’s operation. He has found that cash collections are taking two weeks to be deposited with the University’s cashier office. The auditor has found that part of the reason for the delay is the process followed in processing cash. As he starts to present his case to the manager, he is told that he is not qualified to advise the business manager on how his operation should be run.**
- **The auditor attempts to explain the inefficiencies in the process and is told that University policy requires the department to process cash collections in this manner. When the auditor tells the manager that policy does not require the inefficient processes, the business manager pulls out a memo dated January 15, 1999 from the cashier’s office requiring cash to be processed in this manner.**

What might the auditor do differently to promote a positive outcome?

C: Control your emotions.

A: Acknowledge different perspectives.

R: Refocus through reframing.

P: Problem-solve using non-defensive, collaborative language.

Key points

- **Conflict is normal.**
- **Try not to take the conflict personally—it's about the message, not you as the messenger.**
- **Be aware of your default conflict management style under stress.**
- **Avoid competitive or avoidant (fight-or-flight) responses when your client resists.**
- **Use a collaborative approach if time allows.**
 - Four-step strategy: CARP
- **With experience, you can learn to master effective conflict management skills.**

Questions?

Thank you!



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