

Conflict Management Strategies for the Real World

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Do Any of the Following Scenarios Sound Familiar?

- An employee challenges the safety rules?
- A supervisor strongly disagrees with implementing safety procedures that allegedly slow down production?
- A Manager cuts your safety budget because it is considered overhead?
- Negotiating new job or salary increases?

As safety professionals, conflict is inevitable because employees, supervisors, managers and executive management all have differences in their goals, opinions and values. Throughout the course of the day many disagreements come up in the work environment simply out of common seemingly benign scenarios. As such, safety professionals need to fine-tune their negotiation and conflict resolution skills in order to meet the day-to-day challenges that arise in the normal parameters of our jobs with the best approach possible to become more effective and content in our careers. Effective negotiation refers to the ability to resolve disputes and conflicts and a desire to interact with others to come up with solutions that are acceptable to all those involved.

Your past personal experiences and relationships have shaped over the years how you approach conflict situations. Every employee in the work place shows up with a minimum of 18 years of life experience that will shape how they deal with situations confronted in the work environment. If conflict is managed effectively, relationships are preserved and often improved. When conflict is handled poorly, relationships are strained and weakened, and long-term grudges may develop which often lead to more intense discord and stress in the future. The old saying, "I may forgive but I will never forget" comes into play.

The following scenarios show some typical ineffective conflict situations that will no doubt sound very familiar to the safety professional. After a review of how to foster and improve your negotiation skills, this article provides suggestions and insights into how to improve the outcome of each of these examples.

Example 1

Joe Sanchez is an experienced forklift driver who always exceeds his production goals each day, but refuses to adhere to the newly established speed control limits in the plant. In spite of numerous training and counseling sessions, he simply slows down while you're around. When you leave, he speeds back up again. You are both angry and frustrated so you both avoid each other during your time at the plant.

Example 2

Mike Smith, floor supervisor for a manufacturing plant, did not complete his required safety audits of his area for the last few weeks. He has offered no explanation and no apology, which annoys you. Until recently you and Mike have gotten along well and his support of safety has been consistent and motivated. Mike's behavior is so uncharacteristic that you decide to confront him and demand that you have a meeting with him the next day.

Example 3

Your CFO is looking for budget cuts and does away with 50% of your training budget for the year without discussing it with you. When you find out about it you ask for an explanation and he states that times are tough and we cannot spend money on frivolous training initiatives. You are resentful and dissatisfied with the situation but you don't want to rock the boat.

Example 4

During negotiations for a new position as safety manager the Director offers you less than your most recent salary. Due to the economic climate you feel like you better accept the offer for fear of losing the job offer.

Creating Win/Win Strategies

People respond to conflict in a variety of ways. Many will respond by denying and resisting that the conflict exists in the first place. This often creates a big Elephant in the Room that people try to avoid by pretending it does not exist. Often while the people involved continue in silence, the anger and resentment continue to build up inside. Sooner or later this situation leads to personal stress that can ultimately affect our overall wellbeing and lead to potential illness and physical and emotional distress that impacts our quality of work and productivity. As disagreements are left to fester and grow, the probability of future, more intense disagreements increases. Problems continue and the Elephant gets bigger and bigger until one day it finally explodes.

Others rely on power and authority to resolve their issues. Often we threaten and punish our subordinates or rant and rave wielding our alleged authority. A great example of relying on power and authority is evident when safety professionals using a compliance-based approach often resort to wielding their power to shut down a job or write up an employee. In this case, they are attempting to use power to control, intimidate and force safety compliance at the worksite. These forced outcomes lay the foundation for escalating future conflict.

Ego driven conflict is evident in all aspects of the safety profession and occurs when solutions to disagreements are one sided without regard for the other person. For example, a safety manager decides to streamline the training process by implementing a web based training process. For the last 5 years the previous safety manager conducted safety training onsite, in-person and scheduled classes at the convenience of the supervisor's schedule. This required a lot more time and travel expenses for the safety manager but the supervisors and employees enjoyed the one on one interaction and the ability to set the schedule. Instead of discussing this with the supervisors,

the safety manager simply forged ahead by setting up a computer in each plant for training. He sent an email to the supervisors explaining that from now on everyone would need to utilize the computer based training program and gave a deadline date for completion. The supervisors and employees had little computer experience. The deadline passed and the safety manager got angry. The supervisor later stated that the safety manager was making his own job easier by making his job harder. What could have been a win/win situation quickly progressed to a lose/lose. The safety manager lost by investing in software that was not used, not meeting training deadlines and burning a bridge with the supervisors and employees. The supervisor and employees lost the benefit of the much needed safety training and the rapport and positive relationship that they previously experienced with the safety manager. This situation creates a future legacy for how the supervisor will respond to the safety manager in the future. Because the supervisor perceives that he has lost, he may defy, retaliate, and resist future endeavors that will inevitably create even more conflict.

When we create situations using effective negotiation best practices, we create open dialogue that flows in two directions and ultimately leads to good decision making. It also provides a way for people to develop and grow from the knowledge they share in the relationship. The reality is that there must be balance between giving and receiving which provides an opportunity for win/win results. The only way this is achieved is through effective communication where a balance exists among these skills of speaking, listening and understanding. One of these skills will not work without the other. If a person does not listen they cannot understand. If a person does not speak the other cannot listen and hear what is being said. All three are necessary for the parties to get past the status quo and share their misunderstandings in order to work toward an acceptable solution.

Speaking

Taking the time to dissect the issue and determine what the issues are and why a resolution is needed will prepare you for a smoother negotiation. You will be much more effective when you plan in advance what you will say. Beginning with a clear understanding of the problem formatted in a simple explanation of how each party sees it will be very effective. Remember to use “I” statements instead of “you” statements. For example, the other party will react more favorably to “I become angry when you...” instead of “You make me angry when you...” While the difference is subtle, the impact is clear. When you speak in “I” statements you are accepting responsibility for your reaction and owning it. When you say, “You make me” you are playing the blame game that automatically puts the other person in a defensive position. The harsh reality is that we make our own choices of how we will react to situations. We own our own actions. No one makes you do anything other than yourself. You have a choice.

Finally, plan on when, where and how long you will meet. The jobsite in front of 40 employees will not be the most effective negotiation. Select a neutral, quiet place away from distractions and interruptions. Commit in advance to a time limit, turn off your cell phones and devote the time and attention needed to resolve the issues.

Listening

We may think we are good listeners but the reality is that we often are so busy thinking about what we will say next that we do not listen much at all. Poor attention and listening which has deteriorated even more in our information age of multi-tasking often creates misunderstandings, unrealistic solutions and promotes ongoing conflict.

Listening is defined as “the active process of concentrating all of one’s attention on the other person.” The key word is “active”. While we may be concentrating attention on the other person, it requires practice and skill to actively concentrate. If we are planning our next meal we are not actively listening. Some keys to active listening are asking the other party to share their thoughts and feelings and providing feedback on what has been said while maintaining eye contact. One way to increase your active listening skills is to reframe what is being said by using questions such as “So what I hear you saying is...?” The other person will feel heard and respected.

Understanding

Negotiations will not progress without a clear understanding between two parties. Paying close attention to what is being said as well as the behavior of the other party is crucial. Often nonverbal cues such as body language, eye contact, hand placement and gestures are in direct conflict with the words coming out of our mouths and can convey a person’s true thoughts and feelings. Using check in statements such as “I notice you appear to be...” or “I’d like to know how you are feeling” are great ways to encourage open dialogue and promote more understanding among the parties.

Personal Style Assessment

The safety professional needs to become familiar with their own negotiation style in order to become more familiar and aware of areas that may need improvement. A tool to determine one’s own conflict handling style is called the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument. It is designed to assess an individual’s behavior in conflict situations. It describes a person’s tendency of behavior on two basic dimensions, assertiveness and cooperativeness. Assertiveness is the degree to which one will to satisfy one’s own concerns, and cooperativeness is the degree to which one will try to satisfy the other person’s concerns. Exhibit 1 below shows the main choices a party has in a conflict – the conflict-handling modes.

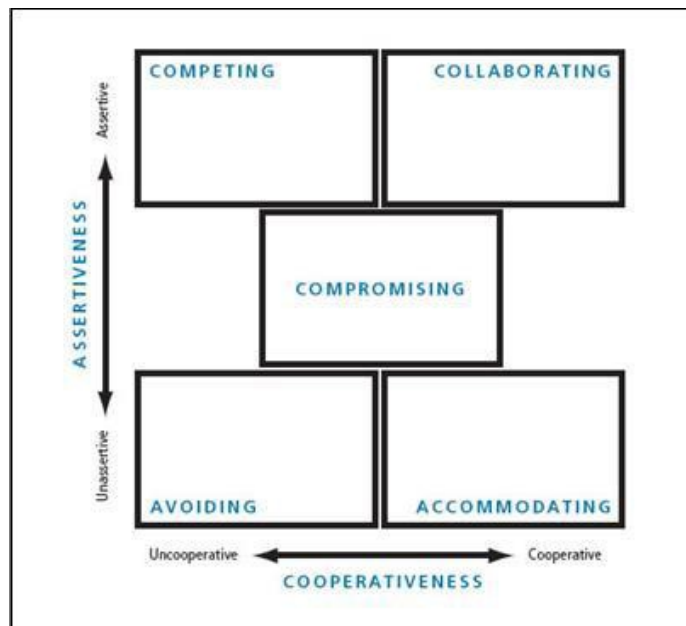


Exhibit 1. Conflict-Handling Modes

These two basic dimensions can be used to define five specific methods of dealing with conflict including:

- Competing – assertive and uncooperative. Parties attempt to try to satisfy one’s own concerns at the other’s expense—to win.
- Accommodating – unassertive and cooperative—the opposite of competing. One sacrifices one’s own concerns to satisfy another.
- Compromising – partially assertive and partially cooperative. One looks for an acceptable solution that only partially satisfies one’s own and another’s concerns.
- Avoiding – unassertive and uncooperative. One tries to sidestep or postpone the conflict, satisfying neither person’s concerns.
- Collaborating – assertive and cooperative. One tries to problem-solve to find a solution that completely satisfies both parties’ concerns.

This framework helps people think more clearly about the choices they have in a negotiation. Many are surprised to realize that collaborating is possible in negotiation. Competition is not required to get needs met and they can be cooperative without being “soft”. Interpretation and feedback materials allow the safety professional to learn about the most appropriate uses for each mode and how to increase their comfort level with the modes he/she uses the least. By recognizing the various conflict modes and identifying them, the negotiator can work toward collaboration where the parties are listening to each other and taking their points seriously, incorporating their views into sound decision making.

Guidelines for Successful Negotiation

Show Respect

Aretha Franklin was spot on when she said we all need a little R-E-S-P-E-C-T.

Regardless of the differences in values, cultures, religions, backgrounds and ethnicity everyone must feel accepted in order to reach successful agreements. Often we get caught up in thinking that we must agree with someone to negotiate successful outcomes with that person. You may be right and it just may not get you anywhere but frustrated and stressed out. We must remember that while we may not agree with another person, we can still listen and learn from their perspective that will increase the opportunity to come up with a solution. Fostering a genuine interest in others creates opportunities to forge more meaningful contacts and creates trust. When you have trust then you can move forward to find solutions.

Parties

It sounds very obvious but you must identify the parties to the conflict and make sure that you are negotiating with the right party. The party must have the authority to make a decision in regard to the dispute. For example, safety professionals often confront employees on a jobsite for not wearing their personal protective equipment. Are you really communicating with the right party in this case? Probably not. The supervisor is the authority at the job that creates the culture where this employee works. So something is going on with that supervisor when the worksite culture is one where employees have a choice about wearing their PPE. While you may be able to persuade the employee to wear their equipment today, how will you be so sure that the condition will not change the minute you leave? The negotiation must occur with the supervisor – the person who has the authority and accountability to change the culture.

Position/Interests

Each person must begin by clearly identifying what he or she wants and needs. It is important to distinguish between the position (what) – what the person verbalizes he or she wants and the interests (why) – the reasons the person wants it. For example, a safety professional wants everyone to wear their PPE. During inspection the safety professional will tell the employees that they must wear it. What is more important is telling the employees why he/she wants them to wear their PPE. It is not because he is a jerk, or he wants to make them uncomfortable and slow down production. It is because he wants to make sure that the employees go home to their families in one piece and they are protected from hazards in the workplace. Talking about the what and the why opens the door to understanding and seeing both sides of an issue.

Explore Alternatives

More information about the problem may be needed before a solution can be decided upon. It may be helpful to examine other sources of information such as books, magazine articles and people who may be familiar with the issue. Outside assistance may help you to overcome your own biases. Mediators can provide impartial assistance with the negotiation process.

Brainstorming is one way to gather many creative ideas rapidly. This process allows everyone to openly make suggestions without fear of criticism. At this stage, every suggestion has value and is accepted. After all suggestions have been shared, they are reviewed to determine whether they might coincide or overlap with each other. Negotiation then becomes a matter of choosing a solution to which no one has an objection. Remember, personal goals should not take priority over shared goals.

Objective Sources

Consider Options

Together doesn't mean giving up or giving in to another person's demands or goals. Two or more individuals can agree that disagreement exists. However, they can also agree to put aside their anger, frustration, resentment and egos in favor of working together for a solution to a common problem. All negotiated work is completed by consensus. A negotiated solution is reached when everyone has given up something to gain common benefits.

Be Reliable

It is important to follow through with negotiated agreements. The very work of negotiation implies a commitment toward whatever outcome has been decided. Developing a plan of action that spells out who is going to do what, where, when and how is helpful. This plan is followed for a specified period of time, and then evaluated at the end of that time period. It may be necessary to change plans and goals along the way, depending on how well the first draft met the shared needs of the individuals involved. However, the success of any negotiated outcome depends on everyone's fullest cooperation and participation. Individuals become reliable and trustworthy partners as a result.

Preserve the Relationship

In general, people will try to preserve valued relationships. Negotiation is a non-adversarial approach to resolving conflict in those relationships. There are no "good guys," "bad guys" or "winners/losers." Negotiation is based on equality. No one wields more power or control than another. The individual's ideas, attitudes, values and objectives are recognized and respected as legitimate. Solutions are mutually agreed upon.

Power

Power is defined as the ability to convince the opposing party to give one what one wants even when doing so is incompatible with the opponent's interests. Power comes in many forms. The first is in information. A negotiator's BATNA (Best Alternative to a Negotiated Agreement) is their greatest source of power. BATNA will help the negotiator determine the point at which he or she will not improve the situation by reaching an agreement. It is a product of reality and the circumstances in which the negotiation finds oneself. The negotiator should also consider the BATNA of the other party to the negotiation

The status of the negotiator is another form of power known as authority. By presenting one as an expert on the safety process, the safety professional will be afforded respect and credibility based on experience, study and accomplishments. The most powerful tool of all is the perception of trustworthiness. With a noble cause and a prepared, concise argument, the safety professional will increase his/her credibility by creating trust.

Finally, time, persistence and patience all create power. Most people are not persistent enough with negotiations and if a person responds negatively to a proposal they give up and move on. If a party refuses to answer a question many never ask a question again. Persistence pays off and time changes perception. The safety professional must develop a confidence level to revisit options that satisfy his/her goals when they have not reached an acceptable agreement. By asking questions multiple times in multiple ways the results may change. A healthy dose of optimism when confronted with "no" will serve a negotiator well.

Successful Negotiation Outcomes

This section provides suggestions for resolving the conflicts discussed in the three examples at the beginning of this publication.

Example 1

When 2 parties both engage in Avoidance, behavior problems fester and boil over time. At some point the pressure will explode and come out in the form of an outburst, vindictive back talking and sabotage. The safety manager's avoidance of Mr. Sanchez's speeding is basically giving Mr. Sanchez a free pass to continue the behavior. The safety manager needs to have a meeting with Mr. Sanchez and call on Human Resources and the supervisor for support.

Example 2

Mike's past behavior of compliance and support of the safety audit process must be taken into consideration before embarking on reprimands and demands. A conversation to check in with Mike to see how he is doing is the first step. He may be experiencing some personal challenges at home or he may be under pressure at work to hit a specific production goal. Starting with a conversation and offering support, help and assistance will be effective. Often times, people just need the benefit of the doubt and some encouragement to get back on track.

Example 3

In the last few years budget cuts in safety have run rampant and are the norm. Until positive signs are more stable budget cuts will continue. Rather than confronting the boss, another approach may be to look for ways to utilize the budget dollars in a more efficient way. Perhaps instead of traveling video conferencing and webinars could be used instead. By looking for

efficient alternatives to stretch the training dollars you become a team player and may reap the reward of finding better, more effective and efficient ways of getting the work completed.

Example 4

Salary negotiations are some of the most difficult and necessary skills a candidate needs. In considering a lower dollar offer there is no harm in approaching with a counter offer. Knowing what you are willing to accept is key. Also consider negotiating non-monetary items such as vacation and PTO days, a more flexible work schedule, health insurance and 401K match and sign on bonuses are all ways to get a better package without forcing a new employer to increase salary. Having all of your negotiable items written down ahead of time is critical to achieve success.

Summary

As life becomes more complex and the world more diverse, your ability to use negotiation skills becomes more important. Negotiation requires time, patience and practice. Negotiation skills are learned over time with practice. The more you actively participate the more confident you will become. By practicing the negotiation strategies and skills, you can make conflict resolution a regular part of your approach to managing relationships at home, at work and in the community. Negotiation can serve not only to preserve relationships, but also to continually strengthen and improve them.