Conflict Management & Navigating Difficult Conversations  
D.Hart, L.Oyama

Modes of Conflict Management¹

**Competing**

*In action:* Assertive and not cooperative. You want to win, and aren’t very interested in the other person’s concerns or potentially damaging the relationship in order to get your way.

*Benefits:* Standing up for yourself, getting what you want, minimize length of discussion

*Costs:* Could damage work relationships, may not explore other good options to solve the problem, others may not be as motivated to “do what they are told” (may be more motivated to participate in the solution if they helped develop it), may escalate into a “fight” or may end up in a deadlock

*When to apply:* When the issue is really important to you, you know you are right, when quick decisive action is required, when consensus has failed, when you are under attack, when unpopular actions need to be taken

*Ex:* “You need to put your duty hours into the RMS every day. I am sorry, but there are no other options here.”

*Pearls for Competing:*  
- Be persuasive & try persuasion first  
- Lay the groundwork  
- Explain your motives  
- Appeal to shared concerns  
- Be specific and credible  
- Stick to the current issue  
- Be respectful  
- Listen to the other person’s concerns and acknowledge / respond to them  
- Use warnings instead of threats regarding people complying

**Compromising**

*In action:* Moderately assertive and moderately cooperative. Each person gets components of what they initially wanted, but neither person is completely happy.

*Benefits:* Can produce a faster resolution than collaborating, maintains relationships, fairness (since each group takes some losses)

*Costs:* Each party takes some losses, solutions less innovative than with collaborating, may not get to the true root of the issue

*When to apply:* When the issue is of moderate importance to you, when people of equal power are in a win-lose situation, when you need to make a quick or temporary solution for a complex issue, when collaborating has failed, when more assertive modes would harm a relationship.
Ex: “I know you want the residents to work 26 shifts per month and they want to work 22. How about if we compromise on 24 shifts per month.”

**Pearls for Compromising:**
- Suggest compromise without looking weak (ie. “perhaps we should consider compromising on this...”)
- Make partial concessions (as long as they are reciprocated)
- Agree on criterion for fairness up front, and / or monitor throughout discussion
- Determine the facts objectively

**Avoiding**

**In action:**
Unassertive and uncooperative. Avoids having the discussion or addressing the problem.

**Benefits:**
Reduces stress by avoiding difficult / unpleasant people or topics, saves time by avoiding low-priority or unimportant issues, allows you to become better prepared for discussion by delaying it

**Costs:**
May negatively impact work relationships, causing hostility, resentment, or fear of talking about issues. Can also delay problem solving that needs to occur.

**When to apply:**
When issues are unimportant, someone else can take care of them, when the issue is a symptom of a larger problem, when you know you can’t win, when the issue is too sensitive and should be handled differently, when the argument becomes emotional or blaming, when you need to postpone the discussion to calm down, gather your data, find time, or other.

Ex: “I need to get some more information on this issue from Bob & Joe, let’s meet tomorrow to discuss further.”

**Pearls for Avoiding:**
- Decide what is important and what isn’t
- Don’t be evasive - give a reason for avoiding and when postponing pick a time
- Control your anger, watch your connotations, use positive language for future meetings
- Give the other person the benefit of the doubt and don’t take what they say personally
- Use humor to diffuse tension

**Collaborating**

**In action:**
Assertive and cooperative. Try to find a win-win solution that completely satisfies both people’s concerns. Multiple viewpoints can contribute to a richer understanding

**Benefits:**
Open communication facilitates learning, new information that leads to relationship building, synergetic decisions, resolve and commitment by both parties

**Costs:**
Requires time, energy and a willingness to consider opposing ideas which can be cognitively/emotionally draining. Treading carefully particularly with sensitive issues is important as if not done well, can make things worse or even offend. Be careful not to be
to sacrificial of your own objectives in the name of collaboration - others may take advantage of your willingness to reach a solution.

**When to apply:**
Use this for when the important issues when both issues are vital to the enterprise.

*Ex: “You need more resident coverage in the ED. I need to assure a balance between service and education. How can we do both?”*

**Pearls for Collaborating:**
- Find a good time when both parties can focus on the issues
- Identify, clarify and share your concerns
- Identify, clarify and hear their concerns
- Obtain as much information as possible to arrive at thoughtful decisions
- Keep focus on the common goal
- Formulate multiple alternatives (facilitate options rather than firm stances)
- Use “we” language
- Use “and” instead of “but”
- Utilize tentative but exploratory language - “what would happen if...”
- Humor can be an effective tool to alleviating tension and building bridges

**Accommodating**

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Unassertive and cooperative. Satisfies the other person's concerns at the expense of your own. Being cooperative, agreeable, deferential to expertise, respectful of authority or appeasing aggressors.

**Benefits:**
Builds relationships, keeps the peace (or may restore it), helping/supporting another's needs, quickly ends the discussion/situation

**Costs:**
Conceding your concerns in order to accommodate may result in a loss of self respect as well as respect from others. Too many concessions may diminish ones motivation or job satisfaction in the name of keeping the peace

**When to apply:**
If you are convinced by their argument, overruled/outvoted, or it repairs a relationship, consider accommodating. Useful if it is a small sacrifice and allows another to fly or boost their confidence. Careful not to let this become your default strategy

*Ex: “I am happy to cover your overnight shifts on March 6th, 7th and 8th so you can have the opportunity to speak at CORD”*

**Pearls for Accommodating:**
- Don’t be a bitter. Be gracious.
- Actively listen
- Try to explain what happened (don’t defend)
- Apologize - sometimes this is your most effective remedy but be genuine about it
- Work to repair the relationship if appropriate

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1 Thomas, KW. Introduction to Conflict Management; Improving Performance Using the Thomas-Kilmann Inventory. 2002.
Tips for when Discussions Become More Difficult

- When you don’t really know what to say / what path to take / how to handle the conversation.
  0 Think about “getting a GRIP”
    0 G: your goals (Me)
      ▪ What do I want?
      ▪ What don’t I want?
    0 R: relationship goals (You/Us)
      ▪ What do I want for others?
      ▪ What do I want for the relationship?
    0 I: ego goals
      ▪ Is my ego playing a role here and should it be?
    0 (P: process goals)
      ▪ Ignore this in this context, more for negotiation stuff
  0 Figure out which of these is most important to you at the time
  0 AND then, ask yourself “What would I do or how would I behave if this is what I REALLY wanted right now?”

- Developing and maintaining psychological safety.
  0 Pay attention to non-verbal cues and voice intonation to develop / keep this.
  0 Recognize when you are starting to lose this and restore it.
  0 Find and maintain mutual purpose and mutual respect.

- BLOWN UP - If you suspect someone is upset with/at you
  0 If mutual respect is at risk
    ▪ Apologize (if appropriate)
    ▪ Contrast (say what you didn’t mean)
    ▪ Create a mutual purpose (CRIB)
      ● Commit to find a mutual purpose
      ● Recognize purpose behind the strategy
      ● Invent a mutual purpose if one doesn't exist (may need to look at higher level stuff)
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- CLAMMED UP - For when they don’t really want to talk
  0 Active listening (AMP VF)
    ▪ Ask
    ▪ Mirror to confirm feelings
    ▪ Paraphrase to convey understanding
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- **PERSUASIVE not ABRASIVE - When you don’t understand the etiology of someone’s actions or feelings.**
  - Dissect the **Path to Action** (see/hear fact – story – feeling – action)
  - Bring up your own concerns ("STATE" them):
    1. Share facts,
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    3. Ask others paths (how do you see it?),
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Ex: “You need to put your duty hours into the RMS every day. I am sorry, but there are no other options here.”

**What if You Overuse Competing:**
- Lack of feedback or input b/c no one wants to share their thoughts with you since all you do is argue or yell at them
- Reduced learning b/c they don’t want to ask you questions – because you’ll argue or yell at them
- Low empowerment – no one will make decisions without your pre-approval - because you’ll yell at them
- You might be surrounded by yes people – this will limit your ability to grow / improve b/c no one will challenge you

**What if You Underuse Competing:**
- Restricted influence – if you can’t stand up for what you believe in, your ability to influence others will suffer
- Indecision – you can’t take a firm stand when needed b/c you are so sensitive to the concerns of others
- Delayed action – being slow to make decisions will frustrate people
- Withholding contributions – depriving others of your good ideas

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Ex: “I know you want the residents to work 26 shifts per month and they want to work 22. How about if we compromise on 24 shifts per month.”
What if You Overuse Compromising:

- Loss of the big picture since you are so focused on coming up with compromise
- Lack of trust – people may see you as someone who does not hold to firm values / principles and they don’t trust you to support them
- Cynical climate – compromising does require gamesmanship, so you could be seen as the “anything for a price” guy

What if You Underuse Compromising:

- Unnecessary confrontations – you make big deals about small issues
- Frequent power struggles – you could be seen as inflexible and unreasonable
- You will be ineffective at negotiating – if you don’t practice it you won’t be good at it,… and you’ll have to do it whether you like it or not at times. There is a lot of compromising in negotiating.

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What if You Overuse Avoiding:

- There will be a lack of input from you – you may be depriving others of your good ideas
- Your decisions will be made by default – this damages your credibility & influence
- This leaves festering issues – the issues you ignore won’t go away
- Climate of caution – others around you may not feel comfortable discussing “real” issues

What if You Underuse Avoiding:

- Hostility / hurt feelings – you can be seen as a jerk
- Work overload – you should avoid things at times that don’t need your input… if you try to be involved in fixing every problem, you will spread yourself too thin
- Lack of prioritization / delegation – others need to learn how to find solutions too
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**When to apply:**
Use this for important issues when opinions of both sides are vital to the enterprise.
Ex: “You need more resident coverage in the ED. I need to assure a balance between service and education. How can we do both?”

**What if You Overuse Collaborating:**
- You will spend too much time on trivial matters
- You may create an environment of diffused responsibility where it appears that you avoid taking responsibility or ownership – you don’t want to create an environment where everyone else also avoids taking responsibility
- People can avoid trying to understand your side b/c they know you will come up with something that works for both of you
- Work overload – you may not be able to say “no”

**What if You Underuse Collaborating:**
- You come up with many quick fix solutions that don’t address the underlying problem
- Lack of commitment occurs when you don’t ask for input from others
- Low empowerment – people feel like their opinions aren’t valued so they stick with the status quo and don’t offer improvement ideas
- Loss of innovation – synergy often yields greater creativity and innovation – 2 heads are better than one – if you don’t use collaborating much, you could lose this benefit

**Pearls for Collaborating:**
- Find a good time when both parties can focus on the issues
- Identify, clarify and share your concerns
- Identify, clarify and hear their concerns - listen, understand, and empathize
• Obtain as much information as possible to arrive at thoughtful decisions - try to make sure you understand any underlying concerns as well (so you get to the root of the problem)
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What if You Overuse Accommodating:
• You may have good ideas that are overlooked & diminish your contribution – if you don’t assert your views, no one will recognize them
• Restricted influence – if you never stand up for yourself, no one will respect you
• Anarchy – people may then think they can do whatever they want if you are always accommodating

What if You Underuse Accommodating:
• Lack of rapport – people will feel you don’t recognize that their needs are important
• Low morale – you may be viewed as unreasonable or unfair
• “By the book” reputation – can’t recognize when exceptions to the policies are appropriate
• Inability to yield – can’t admit when you are wrong, someone has a better idea, or see the other side of an issue

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**Example change management plan for CORD 2015**

| **Needs Assessment (what needs to change & why)** | In our traditional “lecture style” conference sessions, learners are not engaged, falling asleep, playing games on their phones, doing email, etc. They say they are not paying attention because they can’t listen to someone “talk at them” for an hour. |
| **Main Goal / Objective of the Proposed Change** | Design conference sessions primarily based on active learning modalities |
| **Desired Outcome of the Change** | Conference hours where learners are engaged and gaining / applying knowledge in a way that can be easily transferred to the clinical environment. |
| **Factors / Forces that could effect the desired change (includes barriers)** | |
| Environment, Marketplace, & Business Factors: | 70% conference attendance required by ACGME, should be sessions learners find useful, many other programs are moving towards active learning. |
| Organizational Factors: | Culture of active / interactive learning growing from DIO & EM APD. |
| Cultural Factors & Climate: | Culture of collaborative learning and advancement in clinical care is present, but faculty less interested in changing / advancing regarding educational practices. Conference space is antequated and set up with a podium & rows of chairs, not promoting interaction. |
| Leader behavior & mindset: | We are passionate about this change & will deliver great sessions ourselves to set an example for others to follow. |
| Employee / Learner behavior & mindset: (Your faculty) | They want good “teaching evals” but have a hard time letting go of “covering everything”, feeling they “don’t have the time to develop something new”, and a hesitancy to jump in and really try new methodologies (?fear of change / failure?). |
| **Your personal characteristics that can impact change implementation (list positives & negatives, ie. personality preferences, EQ, leadership / negotiation skills, power, etc)** | |
| Strengths: | |
| - Am known as the “education person” with an M.Ed, so have some influence |  |
| - I like to reflect & gather feedback at timely intervals to figure out what is / is not working & modify |  |
| - Descent EQ with self & social awareness / mgmnt |  |
| - Ability to identify leadership styles and apply appropriate ones to this charge (coaching, affiliative, visionary) |  |
| Weaknesses: | |
| - Not in a top “leadership” role as APD, haven’t been around long enough to be at top of heirarchy |  |
| - Frustration that medicine is so behind the rest of the educational world & desire for immediate change. Need to be more patient. |  |
| - Time – not enough time to individually help each person significantly with their conference sessions |  |
| - Less experience with organizational change skills, building and empowering teams, engaging others. |  |
| **Personnel who are** | **Supporters:** DIO, PD, Residents, Younger faculty < 40 |
| supporters, resisters, and maybes |  |
|----------------------------------|  |
| Resisters: Many of the “older” faculty, 55+ |  |
| Maybes: The mid-range faculty ~ 40-55 |  |

<p>| Steps of Implementing Change |  |
|------------------------------|  |
| Establish sense of urgency | We will start “falling behind” other programs who are doing this and we risk losing the “good students” |
| Form a powerful coalition | PD, Assoc PD, Assist PD |
| Create a vision and strategy | To design premier interactive educational sessions for emergency medicine residents |
| Communicate the vision &amp; Inspire a shared vision | Program Leadership (PL) Team (PD, APDs) to communicate &amp; inspire this vision. Will be communicated in faculty and resident meetings. The shared vision will be that we all want to educate our residents as well as we can, and this is a way to do that. |
| Model the way | PL team will sign up for conference sessions early in the year to demonstrate. |
| Empower action with guidance, training, encouragement | Will create fac dev sessions &amp; send out a list of easy ways to make a session more interactive. Will offer to work with faculty on development of their sessions. Will be present at conference sessions to give encouragement, feedback &amp; assistance. |
| Remove obstacles | Help faculty with logistics needed for active learning. (setting up new technology, obtaining props, rearranging conference room to promote interaction, etc). Ascertain what is each person’s barrier and work with them to break that down. |
| Make it safe to make mistakes &amp; sympathize with negative feelings | Remind people this is a new skill they are learning and they won’t be experts at it right away – there will be a learning curve, they will make mistakes and won’t be perfect; that is normal. Sympathize that it is hard to feel like a novice again. |
| Break down change into small steps | Can have people incorporate 1-2 interactive segments if revamping entire session is too overwhelming. Can let them keep a some powerpoint slides and not outlaw ppt all together. |
| Create short term wins / front load rewards | Help a few young faculty develop great sessions, to also be used as examples. Reward people for doing interactive sessions and trying new things (will brainstorm with the chair and PD on how). |
| Stay committed to implementing the change &amp; maintain enthusiasm | Don’t be discouraged by the “old guy” who still gets up and does his 55 minute “lecture”. He will be gone soon enough, or he will start to feel peer-pressured by others. |</p>
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<tr>
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<td>2. Design series of faculty development sessions / materials on how to create active learning environments (some delivered in person in short 5-10 min bursts at faculty meeting, some podcasts, some reference sheets / handouts).</td>
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<td>3. Teach senior residents how to give interactive educational sessions (since G3s run some sessions)</td>
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<td>4. Set up assessment system so presenters can get relevant and timely feedback on their newly designed educational sessions</td>
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<td>5. Meet with Chair of Department and discuss any potential incentives / motivational tactics he’s willing to use (ie. extra-clinical teaching award, recognition, $$, other)</td>
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<td>What needs to change and why? How have you identified this need? Is it a real need or a perceived need (do you have data / evidence to support this need or is it just your opinion)? If you don’t have data / evidence, it is recommended to collect some (even if it is just a survey of whoever the perceived gap / need affects).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Desired Outcome of the Change</td>
<td>What do you want / expect to happen after your main goal / objective has been met?</td>
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<td>Factors / Forces that could effect the desired change (includes barriers)</td>
<td>Environment, Marketplace, &amp; Business Factors: Environment: political, accreditation, economic. Marketplace: is your program / hospital competitive in the current marketplace? Business: ???</td>
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<td>Organizational Factors: How might the goals of your organization and supervisors influence your success with this project?</td>
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<td>Cultural Factors &amp; Climate: What is the culture / climate in your institution and how could this impact your planning (are they innovative and progressive, are they stuck in their ways, etc)</td>
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<td>Leader behavior &amp; mindset: How can the leader (which is often you) influence the change? How can you behave that would encourage others to do what you are doing or what you want them to do?</td>
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<td>Employee / Learner behavior &amp; mindset: (Your faculty) What is the mindset of your faculty? What do you think their thoughts will be on your new initiative? How do you think they will act?</td>
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<td>Your personal characteristics that can impact change implementation (list positives &amp; negatives, ie. personality preferences, EQ, leadership / negotiation skills, power, etc)</td>
<td>Strengths: What are your strengths that can help you push your project along? Do you have high EQ (emotional intelligence – self awareness, self management, social awareness, relationship management), and realize that great leadership works through emotions? What is your personality profile (are you an extrovert and will being conversational, enthusiastic and outwardly supportive help your initiative)? Are you visionary and inspiring? Empathetic? An active listener? How are your conflict management skills (are you by default an avoider, an accommodator, a compromiser, a collaborator, or a confronter, and are you able to switch between styles depending on the circumstance)? How are your negotiation skills (are you good at anticipating your &amp; the other person’s viewpoints, wants, and needs ahead of time)? What is your preferred leadership style and how comfortable are you at using various styles (visionary, coaching, democratic, affiliative, authoritative, pacesetting, coercive / commanding) in various situations? What is your power profile?</td>
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<td>Weaknesses: What things here are you not as experienced with or not as good at?</td>
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<td>Personnel who are supporters, resisters, and maybes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Supporters: Who do you already know will be supportive of your initiative and be “on your side”?</td>
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<td>Resisters: Who do you already know will be against your initiative and actively trying to make it not happen?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Maybes: Who do you think won’t have a strong opinion one way or the other on your initiative?</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

| Steps of Implementing Change | Establish sense of urgency | Why does this change need to be made now? Why not next year? |
| Form a powerful coalition | What 2-3 people can you pull together who will be influential in getting others to get on board? |
| Create a vision and strategy | What is your vision? |
| Communicate the vision & Inspire a shared vision | Who will communicate this vision, how, in what setting, and how will this be turned into a shared vision? |
| Model the way | What can you do to be a role model? |
| Empower action with guidance, training, encouragement | What type of guidance or training is needed? In what ways will you provide encouragement? |
| Remove obstacles | What obstacles will exist if you get people to buy into your initiative? How can you help break these down? |
| Make it safe to make mistakes & sympathize with negative feelings | How can you explain / normalize that things won’t ever be perfect right away when making a big change? |
| Break down change into small steps | How can this change be broken down so that it doesn’t seem so overwhelming to those you are asking to change? |
| Create short term wins / front load rewards | What short term wins will you use and celebrate? How will you celebrate these? Will they be celebrated publicly? |
| Stay committed to implementing the change & maintain enthusiasm | What if your change plan doesn’t work right away? How will you keep motivated if it seems you are fighting an uphill battle? |
| Build on the change | Once this change works, what are some next steps you can take to continue with continual improvement in this realm? |

| List of next (action) steps planned to implement change |
| 1. Write here what steps you will take when you return to your institution to put your change plan in motion… |
| 2. |
| 3. |
| 4. |