Conflict Resolution—Part 1

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Whenever two or more individuals try to accomplish anything together, there will be conflict. Why?

Their life experiences to that point influence how they perceive situations, including their agenda of the moment. This is not wrong--it is normal and natural and can often be beneficial in the long run!

Successful teams recognize that honest conflict is healthy. The organization would never make improvement/progress if everyone were satisfied with what currently exists!

So, it is valuable to recognize and resolve conflicts when they are small. Doing so makes work more enjoyable and allows us to use our limited time and energies more productively.

You probably have tried to resolve conflict through each of the following three methods. Although tempting because they seem like easy ways out of the dilemma, each contributes to bigger problems in the long run! Learn to recognize each of these three and consider trying better ways (see below).

Avoiding – In this situation, each person ignores the conflict, pretends it doesn't exist, or simply chooses that it's not important enough to address. Individuals don't pursue their own needs and don't seem to be concerned about the needs of other individuals involved. (We sometimes call this "lose/lose" behavior.) Avoiding dealing with the issues is the easiest thing to do in the short run, but the situation often gets worse and must be addressed some other way for true reconciliation.

Accommodating – Individuals neglect their own needs, working to meet the needs of other individuals involved. (We sometimes call this "lose/win" behavior.) Accommodating may work for a while, but the needs of the sacrificing individuals rarely go away. When they surface again or become intolerable, the situation is worse, and the conflict must be addressed some other way.

Competing – Individuals work to meet their own needs with little regard for the needs of others involved. (We sometimes call this "win/lose" behavior.) Resolving conflict in this way is prevalent in our society: sports, elections, and legal battles, for example. This approach relies on the use of power of some sort (rank, skill at arguing, historical precedent, financial superiority, etc.). This may bring stability for a brief time, but the "loser" is rarely satisfied for long, the situation often worsens, and the conflict must be addressed some other way.

There are better approaches. They require more effort and more time than the three tempting superficial approaches above, but they yield much better results over the long run. And they usually strengthen the relationships of the individuals involved!

Collaborating – All individuals apply their energies to finding a solution that meets the needs of each individual involved. (We sometimes call this "win/win" behavior.) This rarely occurs easily, but usually provides adequate short-term outcomes and excellent long-term outcomes.

Compromising – One or more individuals works to find an acceptable solution that partially satisfies each individual involved. (This is a low form of "win/win.") A kind of a middle ground between "accommodating" and "competing", this approach addresses issues more than "avoiding" the issue, but not nearly as deeply as "collaborating". The parties involved may consider the outcomes "good enough", but the long-term health of the relationships would be better if more effort went into collaborating for a better resolution.

The key to executing successful conflict resolution rests with this question: "Will you agree to communicate together for as long as it takes for us to come up with a solution that we both can support?" If the parties can agree to this, they are virtually guaranteed a productive outcome!
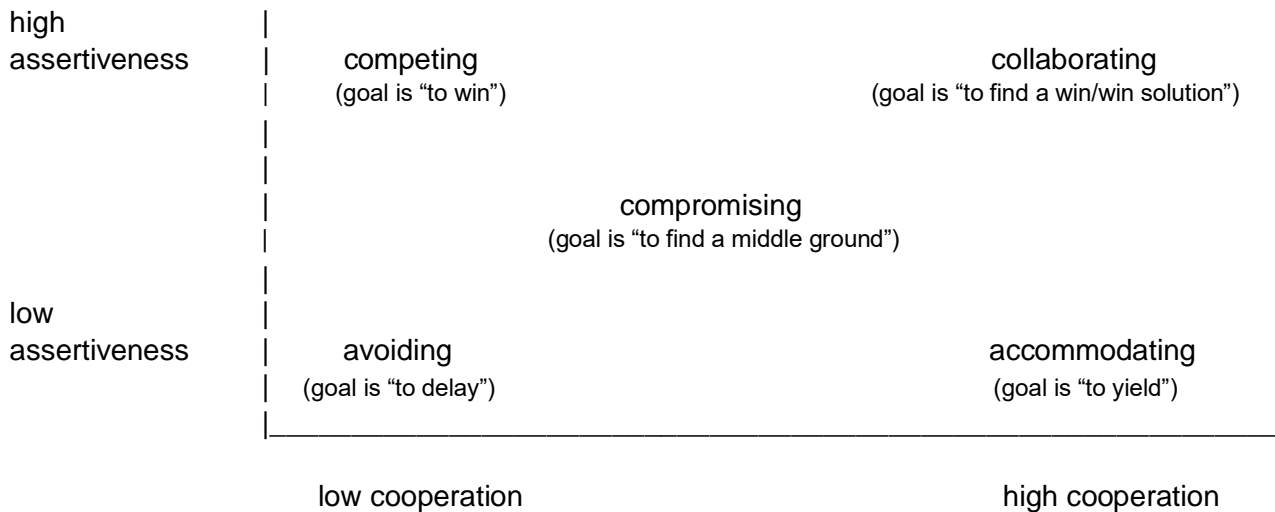
In "Part 2," we'll look at the specific steps that the conflicting parties can take to achieve that collaborative resolution!

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NOTE: Since this article was published, I have learned that the five methods described above were developed by Kenneth W. Thomas and Ralph H. Kilmann. In 1974, they published their ThomasKilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI), the most widely sold of all conflict style inventories.

Their work distributes the five conflict methods on two axes: cooperativeness and assertiveness:
--avoiding (low cooperativeness, low assertiveness)
--accommodating (high cooperativeness, low assertiveness)
--competing (low cooperativeness, high assertiveness)
--collaborating (high cooperativeness, high assertiveness)
--compromising (medium cooperativeness, medium assertiveness)

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high              |
assertiveness     |     competing                              collaborating
                  |    (goal is "to win")              (goal is "to find a win/win solution")
                  |
                  |
                  |                    compromising
                  |              (goal is "to find a middle ground")
                  |
low               |
assertiveness     |     avoiding                                accommodating
                  |   (goal is "to delay")                      (goal is "to yield")
                  |_____

                      low cooperation                          high cooperation
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I apologize to Kenneth Thomas and Ralph Kilmann that I did not realize, when I published this article, that the content is based on their work. I must have been exposed to this information sometime early in my career, and either I did not even know or did not retain that Thomas and Kilmann developed the concept.

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March, 2010