

# Developments in Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 14, 1987

## CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN ACTION: VERBAL STRATEGIES, NONVERBAL BEHAVIORS AND CONFLICT STYLES

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### ABSTRACT

This experiential exercise was designed to enable participants to identify the verbal strategies and nonverbal behaviors which characterize the five styles of conflict management. Although theoretical descriptions of the five conflict styles are available in the literature [1] and several instruments are available for assessing conflict styles [2], none offers behaviorally based descriptions of the conflict styles. In this exercise which bridges theory to practice, participants generate behaviorally based descriptions of what people actually say and do when interacting with others in the different conflict styles.

The overall goals of the exercise are: (1) to promote participants understanding of the five conflict styles by describing verbal strategies characteristic of each; (2) to highlight nonverbal behaviors characteristic of each conflict style; (3) to involve participants in enacting the nonverbal behaviors associated with each conflict style to deepen their understanding and promote empathy; and (4) to indicate strategies for engaging people in alternative conflict styles by addressing the belief systems and assumptions which underlie particular conflict styles.

### INTRODUCTION

#### Overview

This experiential exercise complements the study of conflict management, offering participants the opportunity to extend their theoretical understanding to the specific, concrete, behavioral level. Prior to the exercise, students should be acquainted with the topic of conflict management through readings, mini- lecture and discussion. They should have completed and scored the Conflict Management Survey by Jay Hall which is available through Teleometrics, Inc. [2]. They should have received debriefing on the instrument so that they understand: (1) the two dimension of behavior in conflict situations (concern for personal goals and concern for relationship); (2) theoretical descriptions of the five conflict styles (9/1, 1/9, 5/5, 1/1 and 9/9); (3) the order and preference of their own scores, and (4) criteria for the appropriate use of each conflict style.

#### How This Experiential Exercise Was Developed

For over ten years, I have been teaching conflict management both on campus and in management development seminars. About five years ago, after debriefing a group on conflict styles, I found I did not have enough time left in the session to administer a mixed-motive game. In the pinch, I asked participants to group themselves by their primary conflict styles and discuss strategies people use within their primary style. As I observed the groups, intent upon the verbal content of their discussions, I suddenly became aware of the consistent use of nonverbal behaviors within groups, and the striking contrast of

nonverbal behaviors between groups. As each group reported out the data on verbal strategies, I shared my observations of their nonverbal behaviors. Participants pointed out that those who reported out for their groups engaged in come of the nonverbal behaviors descriptive of their group.

My background includes extensive studies and teaching in nonverbal behavior and neurolinguistic programming. It was this background that probably enabled me to notice the nonverbal distinctions initially. However, volunteers from classes and client groups who have served as observers have been readily able to identify systematic distinctions, either using the worksheet in Appendix 1 or starting with no guidelines whatsoever.

#### Experience With the Experiential Design

I have used this design numerous times during the past five years. It has been an engaging exercise for undergraduate and graduate students and for professionals including librarians, economic developers, chamber of commerce executives, association executives, nuns, civil service employees, military officers, medical center employees and nurses.

The exercise works well because it provides people with the opportunity to participate in their area of strength, i.e. brainstorming what people say and do when using their primary conflict style. The design also involves the element of surprise in that observers attend to and report on the nonverbal behaviors of those engaged in brainstorming. Those who receive feedback on their nonverbal behaviors find the experience lively and fun; so do the observers.

#### Details of Class Organizations

The experiential exercise is especially effective with groups of 40-60 people. No administrative support is needed and debriefing takes place as part of the exercise itself.

Although it is possible to complete the design in a 50 minute class period, a 75 or 90 minute class period allows for more interaction and discussion.

The ideal environment for the exercise is a large room with moveable furniture which allows the entire group to break into five groups. However, I have found participants make necessary adjustments in any physical layout.

#### Preparation Details

Five recorders, one for each group, will need paper and pencil.

Copies of the worksheet "Nonverbal Behavior and Conflict Styles" (Appendix 1) should be reproduced to give to the observers.

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Copies of "A Summary of Nonverbal Behavior and Conflict Styles" (Appendix 2) and "Strategies to Encourage the Use of Alternative Conflict Styles" (Appendix 3) should be reproduced as handouts for all participants.

### INSTRUCTIONS FOR FACILITATORS

1. Introduce the exercise by recalling the five conflict styles. Explain that the purpose of the exercise is to enhance participants understanding of the styles by focusing on specific, concrete, observable behaviors--what people actually say and do when engaging in conflict in the different styles.
2. Identify three to five volunteers to serve as observers.
3. Ask participants to form groups on the basis of their primary conflict styles; indicate a location in the room for each group. As the groups are assembling give the observers copies of the worksheet "Nonverbal Behavior and Conflict Styles" (Appendix 1) and ask them to attend to nonverbal behaviors using the worksheet as a guide. Assign an observer to each group. Ask them to rotate to other groups every three minutes in order to observe all the groups at least once.
4. Ask each group to appoint a recorder who will take brief notes to report out to the group at large.
5. Instruct the groups to list strategies and tactics representative of their primary conflict style. Stress that the list should include specifics--what people say and do when using that particular conflict style. Allot 15 minutes to complete the task.
6. Call time. Ask participants to stay seated in their groups and ask the observers to be seated together.
7. Ask which group would like to report out first. (Most often the 9/1 group volunteers aggressively.) The recorder should report what his or her group listed.
8. After the first reporter finishes, reveal to the group that the observers were attending to nonverbal behaviors to see if certain behaviors characterized the groups discussing the various conflict styles. Ask the observers to discuss their findings for the group that reported first.
9. Proceed similarly until all five groups have reported out and the observers have described the characteristic nonverbal behaviors of all groups.
10. Distribute the handouts: "A Summary of Nonverbal Behavior and Conflict Styles" (Appendix 2) and "Strategies to Encourage the Use of Alternative Conflict Styles" (Appendix 3).
11. Explain that internal states (belief systems and assumptions) and consistent external behaviors (verbal and nonverbal) may be associated. If that is the case, certain

behaviors will seem easy and natural to the people in some groups, but not in others, on the basis of the order and preference of their scores.

12. The instructor then invites participants to experiment with their behavior in the following way. He or she sits facing participants and verbally describes and nonverbally enacts the behaviors characteristic of one conflict style asks the participants to enact those same nonverbal behaviors. As this process goes on, the instructor may encourage participants to express how familiar and easy vs. unfamiliar and difficult the nonverbal enactments seem to people in various groups.

13. Proceed through all the conflict styles, allowing spontaneous discussion and comment by groups or individuals. (It is most likely that the 9/1s will be uncomfortable with 1/9 and 1/1 behaviors and vice versa. 9/9s will find some 9/1 and 1/9 behaviors easy, others unfamiliar.)

14. The instructor may point out that one way to gain empathy for others lies in kinesthetic imitation. The nonverbal role-taking experience may provide participants with insight and understanding about the internal experiences of persons using the various conflict styles.

15. Suggest the following strategy for growth: practice the nonverbal behaviors associated with one the least preferable style and think about the verbal strategies reported for that style. Such mental rehearsal can prepare one to begin experimenting with an unfamiliar style.

16. Refer to the handout "Strategies to Encourage the Use of Alternative Conflict Styles" (Appendix 3), to indicate the ways in which persons using a particular conflict style might be addressed in order to encourage them to adopt a more productive or appropriate style. Emphasize the interpersonal skills involved in each strategy.

17. Summarize the usefulness of the learnings from this exercise as follows:

(a) By observing the verbal strategies and nonverbal behaviors of people engaged in conflict, it is possible to venture a hypothesis about which conflict style or styles are in use.

(b) Recalling that certain internal states (belief systems and assumptions) likely underlie each conflict style, it is possible to venture hypotheses about the internal states of those in conflict.

(c) Should the conflict be proceeding in a nonproductive way, intervention strategies to move the conflicting parties toward using more appropriate conflict styles may be attempted. Such strategies begin by addressing belief systems and assumptions, offering each party the resources he or she needs in order to interact in another style.

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### APPENDIX I WORKSHEET: NONVERBAL BEHAVIOR AND CONFLICT STYLES

| Behavior                       | 9/1<br>Competing | 1/9<br>Accommodating | 5/5<br>Compromising | 1/1<br>Avoiding | 9/9<br>Collaborating |
|--------------------------------|------------------|----------------------|---------------------|-----------------|----------------------|
| 1) Seating Pattern             |                  |                      |                     |                 |                      |
| 2) Interpersonal Distance      |                  |                      |                     |                 |                      |
| 3) Body Orientations           |                  |                      |                     |                 |                      |
| 4) Posture                     |                  |                      |                     |                 |                      |
| 5) Eye Contact                 |                  |                      |                     |                 |                      |
| 6) Gestures                    |                  |                      |                     |                 |                      |
| 7) Back Channeling             |                  |                      |                     |                 |                      |
| 8) Adaptors and use of Objects |                  |                      |                     |                 |                      |
| 9) Voice Tones                 |                  |                      |                     |                 |                      |
| 10) Turn Taking                |                  |                      |                     |                 |                      |

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## APPENDIX 2 A SUMMARY OF NONVERBAL BEHAVIOR AND CONFLICT STYLES

| Behavior                       | 9/1<br>Competing  | 1/9<br>Accommodating  | 5/5<br>Compromising  | 1/1<br>Avoiding   | 9/9<br>Collaborating  |
|--------------------------------|---|---|--|---|---|
| 1) Seating Pattern             | *irregular circle<br>*line up across table  | *circle<br>*eliminate barriers  | *irregular circle<br>*some sit outside circle<br>*barriers ignored   | *irregular circle<br>*barriers used   | *circle<br>*eliminate barriers  |
| 2) Interpersonal Distance      | *moderate to far  | *close  | *moderate to far   | *far  | *close to moderate  |
| 3) Body Orientations           | *vis-a-vis while talking<br>*sub-groups may be clear<br>*may orient to most dominant member                         | *to center of circle  | *irregular   | *irregular<br>*away from each other   | *to center of circle, or<br>*to speaker   |
| 4) Posture                     | *lean forward or back<br>*spread out limbs<br>*cross arms and legs  | *lean forward<br>*open limbs  | *upright<br>*generally relaxed   | *lean back<br>*cross arms and legs<br>*generally tense  | *lean forward<br>*open limbs  |
| 5) Eye Contact                 | *moderate to low<br>*some stares (threat)   | *high<br>*avert gaze to defer<br>*look to listen  | *moderate to low<br>*do not look to listen   | *low  | *high<br>*look to listen  |
| 6) Gestures                    | *point at people<br>*large, sweeping gestures<br>*"stop"<br>*pound table<br>*shake fists<br>*"steeple" with fingers | *bilateral or one handed palming from torso outward (as in giving)<br>*interlaced fingers<br>*palming toward torso (as in "come on")<br>*frequent smiling<br>*much head nodding<br>*lots of facial displays | *bilateral palming with alternate hands away from and toward torso (give and take)<br>*alternating hand gestures (on one hand, on other)<br>*balanced bounce of two hands on a down beat<br>*hand to chin while thinking | *"stop"<br>*shrug shoulders<br>*clasp hands<br>*stroke neck or throat<br>*cover mouth with hand | *circle with hands<br>*point many parts and bring together hands inclusively<br>*baton pointing (not at people)<br>*me-you pointing<br>*hand to chin while thinking |
| 7) Back Channeling             | *low  | *high   | *low   | *low  | *high   |
| 8) Adaptors and use of Objects | *use pens for pointing<br>*spread out papers to take up space<br>*use smoking materials deliberately                | *infrequent   | *infrequent<br>*some note taking   | *self touching<br>*lint picking<br>*drumming fingers<br>*tapping pencils<br>*shake leg          | *infrequent   |
| 9) Voice Tones                 | *loud<br>*clear<br>*fast  | *soft<br>*melodic<br>*rhythmic  | *moderate<br>*monotonic tendency   | *moderate<br>*clipped   | *moderate   |
| 10) Turn Taking                | *many interruptions<br>*overspeech<br>*some talk in paragraphs<br>*no silences                                      | *take turns<br>*several simultaneous conversations<br>*can tolerate silences  | *take turns<br>*few silences   | *long silences between turns  | *take turns<br>*several simultaneous conversations<br>*few silences   |

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## APPENDIX 3 STRATEGIES TO ENCOURAGE THE USE OF ALTERNATIVE CONFLICT STYLES\*

| Behavior  | 9/1<br>Competing   | 1/9<br>Accommodating   | 5/5<br>Compromising   | 1/1<br>Avoiding  | 9/9<br>Collaborating   |
|---|--|--|---|--|--|
| Beliefs   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*differences are to be expected among people</li> <li>*differences reflect the nature of the human species:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>. some have skills, others have none</li> <li>. some are right, some are wrong</li> </ul> </li> <li>*right ultimately prevails</li> <li>*conflict focuses on what's right</li> <li>*prevail in conflict with others whose opinions or goals are in doubt</li> <li>*use persuasion, power and force as tools</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Differences drive people apart</li> <li>*to differ is to reject</li> <li>*maximum attention to others' needs and desires is necessary in enduring relationships</li> <li>*conflict requires self-sacrifice</li> <li>*conflict requires placing the relationship above one's goals</li> <li>*ignore differences</li> <li>*do not risk combat by being over-sensitive</li> <li>*guard against causing irreparable damage to relationships</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*differences should be treated in light of the common good</li> <li>*at times we need to defer to the majority: this allows the relationship to continue and affords a basis for later redress</li> <li>*all should air their views and feelings, but these should not block progress</li> <li>*it is never possible to satisfy everyone</li> <li>*resolution requires persuasive ability and flexibility</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*differences reflect basic attributes which distinguish people: past experiences, irrational needs, innate limits and potentials and levels of aspiration</li> <li>*people are beyond the influence of others</li> <li>*differences are necessary evils in human affairs: accept or withdraw</li> <li>*impersonal tolerance in conflict is the most enlightened approach</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*differences are natural: neither good nor bad</li> <li>*conflict is usually a symptom of tension in a relationship</li> <li>*if accurately interpreted, tension can be resolved and relationship strengthened</li> <li>*conflict requires confrontation and problem solving</li> <li>*working through conflict brings people close together and promotes creativity</li> </ul> |
| Key Assumptions                                       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*conflict has two outcomes: win or lose</li> <li>*winning is associated with status and competence</li> <li>*losing is associated with loss of status, incompetence and weakness</li> <li>*conflict puts ego on the line</li> <li>social survival may be at stake</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*human relationships are so fragile they cannot endure the trauma of working through genuine differences</li> <li>*acceptance and affiliation are necessary</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*if you win a bit and lose a bit, you can soften the effect of losing by limiting gains</li> <li>*everyone will get a time to win</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*hopelessness: conflict is an endless, punishing experience in which you can't win</li> <li>*expect to lose and suffer with conflict</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*both relationships and personal goals are mutually important</li> <li>*serving each other's personal goals maintains the relationship</li> <li>*working through differences may lead to creative solutions of both personal and interpersonal problems</li> <li>*feelings are legitimate and must be recognized</li> </ul>   |
| Strategies to Encourage the Use of Alternative Styles | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*address the 9/1 ego:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>. assure status and competence</li> <li>. express respect</li> </ul> </li> <li>*point out potential differences between being right vs. effective</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*assure the 1/9 that the relationship is important and will endure</li> <li>*when 1/9 does not express his or her personal goal, express disappointment or frustration: they may violate their own rules of self-sacrifice to please others</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*catch them in their own rules by asking them to work through conflict differently this time (i.e., bargain)</li> <li>*appeal to winning a bit more and losing a bit less</li> <li>*stress the underlying principle, issues, values, or long-term objectives</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*empower by reducing reasons for fear and pain</li> <li>*point out that withdrawal and detachment may not protect one and may insure loss and pain by default</li> <li>*provide assurance that inputs are not only desired but necessary for overall coordination</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*point out that trivial issues don't require the best solutions: the time and energy necessary for collaboration or consensus may not be worth it</li> <li>*ask if the need for consensus or collaboration reflects a desire to minimize risk or diffuse responsibility</li> </ul>  |

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### REFERENCES AND NOTES

- [1] Theoretical descriptions of conflict styles are available in the following references:

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Cosier, R.A. & Ruble, T.L. Research on conflict handling behavior: An experimental approach. Academy of Management Journal. 1981, 24, 816-831.

Filley, A. Interpersonal conflict resolution. Glenview, IL: Scott Foresman, 1975.

Folger, J.P. & Poole, M.S. Working through conflict: A communication perspective. Glenview, IL: Scott Foresman and Company, 1984.

Hall, J. Conflict management survey: A survey on ones characteristic reaction to and handling of conflicts between himself and others. Conroe, TX: Teleometrics International, 1969.

Kilmann, R.H. & Thomas, K.W. Developing a forced-choice measure of conflict-handling behavior: the MODE instrument. Educational and Psychological Measurement, 1977, 37, 309-325.

Phillips, E. & Cheston, R. Conflict resolution: What works? California Management Review, 1979, 21, 76-83.

Ruble, T.L. & Thomas, K.W. Support for a two-dimensional model of conflict behaviors. Organizational Behavior and Human Performance, 1975, 16-143-155.

Thomas, K. Conflict and conflict management. In M. Dunnette (Ed.), Handbook of industrial and organizational psychology. NY: Rand McNally, 1976.

Wilmot, J.H. & Wilmot, W.W. Interpersonal conflict. Dubuque, Iowa: Wm. C. Brown, 1978.

- [2] Commercially available instruments which assess conflict styles include:

Conflict Management Survey  
Teleometrics, International  
2203 Timberloch Place, Suite 104  
The Woodlands, TX 77380

Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument  
Xicom, Inc.  
Sterling Forest  
Tuxedo, NY 10987

Reference to other instruments is made in:

Lawrence, P.R. & Lorch, J.W. Organization and environment. Homewood, IL: Irwin, 1967.

Putnam, L. & Wilson, C.E. Development of an organizational communication conflict instrument. In M. Burgoon (Ed.), Communication Yearbook (Vol. 6) Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1981.