

# ASSESSING AND APPLYING “APPROPRIATE” CONFLICT MANAGEMENT STYLES

Robert J. Oppenheimer  
Concordia University  
roberto@jmsb.concordia.ca

## ABSTRACT

*This paper describes how conflict management may be taught by reviewing the styles, conducting a self-assessment, reviewing the appropriateness of each style and applying them in three case situations is discussed. It introduces and provides an example of how to use case incidents with “multiple choice” solutions. This approach provides a more structured method for using case methods. When used for teaching conflict management it provides an additional method for assessing one’s conflict management style and discussing which conflict management styles would be most appropriate.*

## INTRODUCTION

In teaching conflict management one approach that is frequently used is to explain the five conflict management styles based upon the dimensions of assertiveness and cooperativeness (Blake and Mouton, 1964; Filley, 1975; Cosier and Ruble, 1981). It is explained that being low on assertiveness and cooperativeness is an avoiding style; being moderate on both is a compromising style; being high on both is a collaborative style; being high on cooperativeness and low on assertiveness is an accommodating style and being low on cooperativeness and high on assertiveness is a competing or win-lose style.

In conjunction with this, self-assessments of conflict management styles are sometimes conducted to provide feedback as to how one tends to deal with conflict (Thomas and Kilman, 1974). Following an understanding of the conflict management styles the question of which style would be most appropriate and under which circumstances is sometimes addressed. Whetten and Cameron (2005) examine this by considering the four variables of the importance of the relationship, the importance of the issue, one’s relative power and the time urgency.

They argue that when both the relationship and the issues are unimportant then an avoiding style is appropriate; when both are important and there is sufficient time, then a collaborating style should be used; when the relationship is important and the issue is not, then an accommodating style is appropriate; when the relationship is unimportant, the issue is important, your relative power is high and there is high time urgency, then a competing or win-lose style may be in your best interest.

These concepts can then be applied by making use of case studies or brief case incidents. An advantage of using cases is that they require the student (or participant) to apply the concepts learned by developing their own answers. The solutions developed may be discussed in a general way or they may be related directly to the concepts covered. Either way it may be difficult for some individuals to clearly recognize how their specific response to a case relates to the concepts the case is supposedly addressing.

To overcome this potential limitation, case incidents were developed with alternative solutions. Each of the four “solutions” is consistent with one of the five conflict management styles. A fifth alternative permits the person to provide his or her own answer. When debriefing the results of the case incidents the conflict management style of each of the alternatives and their appropriateness are discussed. This provides the student with additional feedback as to which conflict management style he or she used in that situation and if there is a consistent pattern, what style he or she tends to use.

The case incidents that were developed were modeled after those developed by Whetten and Cameron (2005) which were created to facilitate the examination and discussion of alternative approaches to conflict management.

## INSTRUCTIONS

The students are asked to read each of the three case incidents, select the alternative they would most likely use or to create their own alternative, if they did not like any of the choices presented. They are also asked to indicate whether the issue was important to them and whether the relationship was important to them after they made their choice as to what they would do. (The case incidents are included at the conclusion of this paper.)

## RECORDING AND DISCUSSING RESULTS

The number who responded to each of the five alternatives, for each of the three case incidents, is recorded. Before discussing the results of each case incident, the importance of the issue and the importance of the relationship are discussed. This sets the groundwork for talking about what the “appropriate” approach would be. In some discussions the question as to what the issues are is an

## Developments in Business Simulation and Experiential Learning, Volume 34, 2007

interesting subject. When this occurs it is acknowledged that they need to determine what the issues are, how important those issues are to them and how they will address them.

### The Answers

In reviewing the results, the reason why the “most appropriate” conflict management style would be in their best interest is discussed. The conflict management style of each of the alternatives is also provided. These “answers” are reviewed for each of the following three case incidents.

### Ruby Friday’s

In the first of the three case incidents, Ruby Friday’s, the issue is the health of one’s child, which is considered to be very important. The relationship with the hostess of the restaurant or with the businessmen is generally considered unimportant. In this case incident the questions of time urgency, which is high and your relative power are also discussed. There is usually some disagreement as to whether your power is high or not. This may be used to discuss the concept that how you define your relative power may become a self-fulfilling prophesy. When this occurs it is also highlighted that if you overestimate your relative power you may create a very negative situation for yourself. In this case incident the issue is important, the relationship is not important, the time urgency is high and your relative power is (arguably) high. This combination would mean that a competing or win-lose conflict style would be appropriate.

- Alternative one is a compromise.
- Alternative two is competing.
- Alternative three is avoiding.
- Alternative four is accommodating.

Given these four alternatives, competing, that is, alternative two would be the best of the four ways of proceeding. However, if one engages in win-lose, then it is possible to lose. This opens the discussion for what might be a better way of proceeding. Alternative five allows the students to present what they would do and they usually provide a collaboratively solution. An example would be to explain the situation to the hostess and ask her to seat you in another part of the restaurant and/or ask the businessmen to stop smoking. It should be noted that the case incident does not say whether the businessmen were in the smoking section or not.

### Orange Computers

In the second of the three case incidents, Orange Computers, the relationship (with Jim, your boss) is very important. The issues as they are usually defined are the

cleanliness of the floor, the layout of the machines and painting them, which are of low importance. Given this diagnosis of the situation, an accommodating conflict management style, which is alternative two, would be appropriate.

- Alternative one is avoiding.
- Alternative two is accommodating.
- Alternative three is a compromise.
- Alternative four is competing or win-lose.

Sometimes the issue of the performance review evaluation or the issue of the expenses associated with doing what the boss wants are thought to be important. If someone thinks that an issue is important to him or her, then it should be addressed as something that is important. The question is how to address those issues while keeping in mind the importance of the relationship is explored. The different answers offered in alternative five are examined in this regard. Often though, these are competing or compromising approaches. It is recommended that if the relationship is far more important than the issue, then an initial accommodating approach, followed by an open-ended question to obtain more information in a problem solving manner should be taken.

It is interesting to note that his case is reported to be based upon an actual incident that occurred during the start-up of Apple Computer and the boss, Jim, was Steve Jobs (Whetten and Cameron, 2005).

### Johnson Office Supply

In the third of the three case incidents, Johnson Office Supplies, the issue (the credit policy) is very important and the relationship (with Janet) is also important. However, not everyone would agree that the relationship is important. When this happens it makes for an interesting discussion as to how important relationships are with those you need to work with. With the issue and the relationship being important and time urgency being low to moderate, a collaborative conflict management style, alternative four, would be most appropriate.

- Alternative one is competing or win-lose
- Alternative two is a compromise.
- Alternative three is accommodating.
- Alternative four is collaborative.

Most of the students select the collaborative style, alternative four. It is the alternative that is most likely to address the interests of both parties. With most selecting alternative four, there is usually only limited discussion for this case incident. It may be pointed out that when a collaborative alternative is presented, as in this case incident, it is generally perceived as the preferred way of proceeding. The challenge, therefore, is to create a collaborative outcome, even when it is not initially apparent.

REFERENCES

Blake, R. R. and Mouton, J. S. 1964. *The Managerial Grid*. Houston: Gulf Publishing.

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

Filley, A. 1975. *Interpersonal Conflict Resolution*. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman.

Ruble, T. L. and Thomas, K. W. 1976. Support for a two-dimensional model of conflict behavior. *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance*.16: 143-155.

Thomas, K. W., and Kilman, R. H. 1974. *Thomas-Kilman conflict MODE instrument*. Tuxedo, NY: Xicom.

Whetton, D. A. and Cameron, K. S. 2005. *Developing Managerial Skills, Sixth Edition*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall

## RUBY FRIDAY'S

You are taking your son, Michael, and your daughter, Joyce, out for dinner. Although there are a number of restaurants in your neighborhood, this is one of Joyce's favorite. It is Joyce's tenth birthday and you decided to have a fun evening. Michael, who is twelve, even promises that he will be especially nice to his sister. All three of you are looking forward to a wonderful evening.

When you made your reservation you asked for the non-smoking section and when you were being seated you confirmed that you were in the non-smoking section. On your way to your table you are surprised as to how crowded the place is for a Tuesday evening. You are pleased that the restaurant has a fairly large non-smoking area because Joyce is allergic to cigarette smoke. You are looking forward to the day when smoking is prohibited in restaurants and other public places, as it is in other jurisdictions.

The three of you are having a good time talking about the birthday party that Joyce is going to be having over the week-end with her ten best friends and whether Michael will be showing up or not. However, you suddenly realize that Joyce's eyes are tearing up and her breathing seems to be different. You then notice that there is a group of ten businessmen drinking, laughing and smoking a few tables away from you. You ask Michael to take Joyce outside. At the same time you see that the hostess that assigned you to your table is bringing a group of four to an empty table, which is next to your table. It is the only empty table that you noticed in the part of the restaurant you are in.

What would you do?

1. Ask the hostess to request that the businessmen closest to your table refrain from smoking. Perhaps some of the businessmen close to your table would stop smoking if asked or would change seats with others in their party who would not mind refraining from smoking. This way the smokers would be farther from your table.
2. Demand that the hostess tell the businessmen to stop smoking and tell her that if they do not you will leave.
3. Tell the hostess that you are sorry, but you must leave because your daughter is allergic to smoke.
4. The restaurant is crowded and the businessmen are lively and having fun. Rather than make an issue of it you decide to wait to see if they stop smoking when they are served. If the smoke is still too much you will take your meal to go and continue your party at your home.
5. Other, please specify \_\_\_\_\_

---

---

---

---

**ORANGE COMPUTERS**

You have been working with Orange for one year and were recruited to Orange because of your expertise in manufacturing and your people skills. You are very pleased to be working at Orange as it has state-of-the-art equipment and is one of the leading firms in the field. Your boss, Jim, is a dynamic leader who has generally been supportive of you and the initiatives that you have taken.

You just met with Jim for your first annual performance review. The meeting went well with most of the discussion centering on the things you have done as well as your accomplishments. The only issues that were identified under “issues requiring further attention” were the cleanliness of the floor, the placement of the production equipment and the colors of the machines. Jim wants the floor to be spotless, have all the machines painted the same shade of light grey and have them perfectly aligned.

You find this bothersome because you do not see what difference it makes. You could assign people to do what Jim wants, but it would add to the costs of the operation and would not improve productivity. You understand that it may impress some of the potential corporate clients, who tour through the plant, but it would not affect performance and it would be costly.

What would you do?

1. Ignore the issue. It is a minor thing so there is no point in even raising it.
2. Tell Jim that you did not realize that these issues were that important to him and that you would make sure that they were taken care of.
3. Suggest to Jim that the floor is really pretty clean and that you would ask the employees to make sure the floor stays clean and that you would have them align the machines more exactly; however, you would try to get him to forget about painting the equipment all the same color because it really makes no difference what color they are.
4. Let Jim know that the things he wanted done in the “issues requiring further attention” really did not have any impact on productivity and that you did not want to take the time and incur the expense to make the changes he wanted
5. Other, please specify \_\_\_\_\_

---

---

---

---

**JOHNSON OFFICE SUPPLIES**

You have been working at Johnson Office Supplies for three years. For the last fifteen months you have been the Sales Manager and are responsible for the overall sales volume for the company. You were promoted to this position because of your strong sales record, your communication skills and your team building ability.

The company’s business focuses mainly on supplying small businesses with a broad range of office supplies, which includes office furniture. Six months ago Janet was hired as the Credit Manager. It is her job to assess the credit worthiness of the larger potential and current clients. She then determines the credit limitations and terms of payment for each customer. In some cases sales are blocked because she will not allow any credit to be extended. These restrictions have had a significant impact on the overall sales of your team. Your sales people have told you that Janet’s restrictive policies are far tighter than those of your competitors. You have confirmed that this was correct in the five cases brought to your attention. You are convinced that this is costing the company sales.

When you happened to meet with Mr. Johnson, the President and founder of the company you briefly mentioned your concerns to him. He said that he understood that it was sales that drove the company, but that he had to make sure that he didn’t sell to those who are likely to go out of business and not pay. He added that if there was a problem it should be worked out with Janet.

What would you do?

1. Tell Janet that it is the sales that drive the company and that Mr. Johnson said that to you. Further that you have confirmed that her policies are more restrictive than your competitors and her policies are costing the company a lot of money in lost sales. Explain to her that you want a level playing field and insist that she loosen up on the credit terms. Let her know that if she does not change the credit policies then you will take up the matter with the President, because the present policies are unacceptable.
2. Discuss with Janet the problems that the current policies are causing and see if there is anything she can do to help you out. It seems as though there must be some change that could be made that would not be too disruptive for her and would give you more freedom as to whom you can sell to and under what credit terms. Some sort of compromise would be helpful.
3. Ask Janet if there is anything she could do to loosen the credit terms. You realize you are going to have to work with her over the long haul and do not want to alienate her. Further, you do not think you have the support of the President. Therefore, if she says no, then there would be no point in pursuing it.
4. Review with Janet the costs of the lost sales in terms of the lost profits that have resulted from the tight credit policies. Work with her to determine her needs and what a more liberal credit policy would cost. Determine what credit policy would be most profitable for the company and work with her to reach an agreement on such a policy.
5. Other, please specify \_\_\_\_\_

---

---

---

---