Managing Conflict with Customers and Co-workers:

Work Settings and Beyond

Judith A. Cook, Ph.D.
Center on Mental Health Services Research and Policy
University of Illinois at Chicago

Carol A. Petersen, M.Ed.
Center on Mental Health Services Research and Policy
University of Illinois at Chicago

This document was developed by the University of Illinois Center on Mental Health Services Research and Policy, funded by a grant from the U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Disability Employment Policy (DOLE9430104). The opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the U.S. Department of Labor. Nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply the endorsement by the U.S. Department of Labor.

University of Illinois at Chicago
Center on Mental Health Services Research and Policy
Managing Conflict with Customers and Co-workers: Work Settings and Beyond
Conflict

A state of disagreement or opposition between two or more persons regarding ideas, interests, needs, values, desires, or wishes.

Conflict is an inevitable and natural part of everyday life and every workplace.
The Costs of Conflict

Where does conflict come from?
• Our personal fears and insecurities
• Misunderstandings in communication
• Lack of information or communication
• Need for control and predictability in our lives

What does it cost you?
• Creating professional stress and burnout
• Decreasing your productivity
• Quitting your job
• Getting into fights at home with friends, family, and significant others
• Decreased physical well-being: tension headaches, increased blood pressure, or abdominal pain
• Decreased emotional well-being: stress, depression, mood swings, or irritability

What does it cost your agency?
• Absenteeism
• Poor customer outcomes
• Stressful environment
• Reduced morale
• Dissatisfied customers
The Conflict Resolution Pyramid

- Understanding ourselves
- Understanding the situation
- Interpersonal interaction
- Problem solving and negotiation
- Bumping it Up: Mediation/Arbitration/Litigation
Resolution Pyramid: Understanding Ourselves

“Above all know thyself.”

Feelings
Experiences
Knowledge
Skills
Abilities
Dreams
Fears
Insecurities
Hopes
EXERCISE: Assessing My Preferred Style of Conflict Resolution

Using the following scale, rate each item in the manner which best reflects what you actually do in a conflict situation. This is a self-assessment of your current style of conflict resolution. Be honest as to what you actually DO versus what you think you should do in a conflict.

5-Always 4-Usually 3-Sometimes 2-Rarely 1-Never

____ 1. I go along with other’s decisions rather than disagree.
____ 2. I encourage others to give a little.
____ 3. I point out what we agree on rather than dwell on things we disagree about.
____ 4. I stand my ground
____ 5. I go along with others - but after I tell them I disagree
____ 6. I agree to things and hope they will work out.
____ 7. I try to keep others from feeling bad in an argument.
_____ 8. I am concerned that we both get what we want.
_____ 9. I argue to get a portion of what I want.
_____ 10. I point out problems in the other person’s logic.
_____ 11. I try to figure out “why” people want what they want, and “why” I want what I want.
_____ 12. I avoid people when they are angry.
_____ 13. I try to keep the peace.
_____ 14. I operate from a “give and take” position.
Assessing My Preferred Style of Conflict Resolution

5-Always  4-Usually  3-Sometimes  2-Rarely  1-Never

15. I have trouble admitting I’m wrong.
16. I put the needs of others above my own.
17. I will “give a little to get a little” and expect the same of others.
18. I win arguments.
19. I keep my thoughts to myself rather than create a conflict.
20. I ask others to tell me what they want and I work with them to find solutions that satisfy both of us.
21. I do whatever I can to avoid hard feelings.
22. I am very concerned with how others feel.
23. I try to get the other person to compromise.
24. I clearly state what I want out of a situation and am open to coming up with options to help me get it.
25. I try hard to get others to see my logic and the advantages of doing things my way.
26. I seek to find a middle ground.
27. I go out of my way to avoid an argument.
28. I let others have their way.
29. I listen carefully to the other person to see if I understand their point of view.
30. I will go to extremes to win an argument when I am “right”.

Score the exercise using the following scoring key to determine your preferred style and your “backup” style. Your “back-up” style is the approach in which you scored second highest.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Confronting</th>
<th>Avoiding</th>
<th>Accommodating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Item</td>
<td>Score</td>
<td>Item</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>___</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>___</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>___</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>___</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>___</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>___</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>_____</td>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Compromising</th>
<th>Collaborating</th>
<th>PREFERRED STYLES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Item</td>
<td>Score</td>
<td>Item</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>___</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>___</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>___</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>___</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>___</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>___</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>_____</td>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What is your preferred style? (Highest score)
What is your “back-up” style? (Next highest score)
Five Basic Responses to Conflict

Worst to Best Conflict Resolution Style

1. **Confronting**: using aggression, passive aggression, or violence

2. **Avoiding**: withdrawing or giving in

3. **Accommodating**: smoothing or submitting

4. **Compromising**: “splitting the difference”

5. **Collaborating**: working to solve the problem
What is a Hot Button?
Things that trigger a strong emotional response in you—and particularly those things which make you angry, defensive, resistant, or in some manner push you over the edge of your self-control.
EXERCISE

Recognizing My “Hot Buttons”

Think about a recent situation where you found yourself getting upset and angry in your interaction with someone outside your work setting.

1. What was the immediate event that happened right before you became angry or upset?

2. What was it about that situation that made you upset or angry?

3. Formulate a concise description of your “hot button.”
**How to Control Your Hot Buttons**

**Hit the Pause Button:** Try to say or do something that will help to slow down the situation to give yourself a moment to think, a moment to develop an appropriate response rather than an angry reactive response. This could mean, taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly, counting to three, asking the person to repeat the statement, taking a short break from the discussion “I have to go do ____ I’ll be right back.” “Give me a minute to think about that.” Hitting the pause button will help you to collect your thoughts and your emotions.

**“Go to the Balcony”:** This means taking an emotional and mental step back from the situation while it’s happening. This requires you to emotionally detach from what’s being said. Admittedly this is difficult to achieve but it’s an effective way to maintain emotional control. Stepping back and observing the situation as if from a balcony will help you to get a clearer picture of what is being said and will help you to better control your response.

**Acknowledgement:** Let people know that their words are having an affect on you. Doing this lets them know that they may be going too far. It also gives them the opportunity to rephrase or soften what is being said. So feel free to say “That really hurt.” “You’re making me upset.”

**Self-affirmation:** Sometimes hurtful words feed right into our deepest fears and insecurities. It can feel like an old wound was cut open. After the situation has ended you need to do some self-healing by reminding yourself of your true skills, talents, knowledge, and goodness. It’s important to do this because you need to get this poison out of your system and move on.

**Humor:** De-activate your Hot Button by having a good laugh. At this moment it’s the hardest thing to do but it’s the best medicine for you. So make a plan to only look at comedies that night or for as many nights as you need. Laughing will help your body release some “feel good” chemicals, lower your blood pressure, and relax your muscles.
Resolution Pyramid: Understanding the Situation

**Identify** the issue, its impact on you, and your feelings about it.

Distinguish between **Concrete** and **Relationship** problems. Deal with them separately.

Remember that people have different perceptions and interpretations of the same event. Don’t assume that your perspective is shared by others. **Check it out.**

**Choose your battles wisely.** You cannot fight on all fronts simultaneously.

Ask yourself. **Is this very important to me?** Do I have the time to resolve it collaboratively?
Resolution Pyramid: Interpersonal Interactions

Creating a Conducive Environment: shows respect for the other person and the topic.

- A sense of safety
- Little or no distractions
- A sufficient level of privacy
- Adequate time to address the issues

Actively Listening/Communicating: shows understanding through your words.

- Clarify
- Paraphrase
- Summarize
- Ask questions

Actively Attending: shows interest through your body language.

- Good eye-contact
- Ignore outside distractions
- Use natural, calm tone of voice
- Positive gestures - head nodding, smiling
- Awake body posture – alert, leaning forward, attentive
Summarizing Phrases to Clarify and Communicate Better

- What you’re telling me is ...
- Let me see if I understand what you said ...
- As I understand your situation ...
- It seems to me that what you’re saying is ...
- Please correct me if I’m wrong, but I hear you saying ...

“So what you’re saying is...”
Communicating Clearly

- Plan your message
- Briefly describe the problem in terms of behaviors
- Use neutral language
- Avoid making judgments or blaming motive to others
- Use “I” rather than “YOU” statements
- Encourage two-way conversation

“I have four points that I want to talk about today.”
Tips You Can Use to Understand the Situation and Enhance Interpersonal Interaction

If you have something important to say, **WRITE IT DOWN**. Writing helps organize your thinking.

Find **DISTRACTION FREE** environments and choose a time when each person can focus on the issue without distractions. Don’t try to do two things at the same time – such as have a conversation and read a telephone message.

Use **OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS** to invite dialog and elicit information. Use closed questions to clarify specific information.

Make sure your **NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION** expresses the message you want to send. Your body language needs to be consistent with your words.

Use the **PAUSE** button before you speak. Count to three after a person has stopped speaking before you leap into the conversation.

Good listening means **NOT ASSUMING** meaning or intent. Be wary about jumping to conclusions about the speaker’s message or intent.

Ask for **CLARIFICATION** when you don’t understand something. Requesting clarification does not mean that you are slow. It means that you sincerely want to understand what is being said.

**RESTATE** in your own words what you think the person is saying and feeling about the issue. Trust the other person to correct you if you are not 100% accurate.

While you are listening to another person, **MAKE NOTES**. This is a useful memory tool, and gives the impression that you are taking the other person seriously.

**TAILOR** your message to your listener. Relate your message to the listener’s frame of reference and priorities as you understand them.

Never try to tell a person that he or she doesn’t feel the way they do – or try to talk them out of their feelings. Instead, offer **VALIDATION** for the person’s feelings and perspectives.
Resolution Pyramid: Problem Solving and Negotiating

**Problem solving/negotiation**: a back and forth process for solving the problem created when two or more parties have conflicting interest.

Reframe your conflict resolution meeting into a joint problem solving task. This means **shifting** each person’s attention from their initial stated goal and onto their unstated or underlying goal.

In other words, identify their true agenda.
The PRESTO Process

P -- Prepare
R -- Relate
E -- Explore Interests
S -- Suggesting Option
T -- Tailor Agreement
O -- Operationalize

“Presto chango your conflict into consensus!”
Prepare: think through the situation, think about what you want and hope to accomplish, prepare what you are going to say.

Strategy – prior to the discussion complete the “Problem Solving Negotiation Worksheet.” This will help you to anticipate and prepare for the main points of what needs to be said and accomplished.

Relate: focus on establishing and maintaining a good working relationship throughout the discussion, discover the interests, and goals of your co-worker.

Strategy – start off your discussion by asking 3 questions that you know will get a “yes” response. This will demonstrate that amidst the conflict there is common ground between you which helps to put the other person in a more agreeable state of mind.

Explore Interests: it’s important to understand the other persons perspective and goals as it relates to the conflict, as well as your own. Without this understanding finding a win-win solution for both of you will be harder.

Strategy – before the meeting use the “Five Whys” to help identify and understand your interest(s) in how the conflict is resolved and those of your co-worker.

During the meeting: confirm the interests and goals of your co-worker as they relate to the conflict, find common ground, use “I” statements, use neutral language, stay calm, don’t let your “Hot Buttons” control your reactions, and actively listen to the other’s point-of-view.
**The PRESTO Process**

**Suggest Options:** brainstorm a variety of concrete solutions that help to satisfy both of your needs.

**Strategy:** don’t worry about the content or clarity of your ideas while brainstorming or about picking the right one. It’s more important just to get the different options said and on paper.

**Tailor Agreement:** use a standard of fairness and equity to narrow down and choose one option that works best for both of you. Even after an option is chosen, it will require both of you to tailor, and craft it to meet your needs and interests.

**Strategy:** if possible take some time to think about which option(s) you like best. When you start to talk about these options work to build one option that works best for both of you. This could involve taking bits and pieces from each option to tailor the best one.

**Operationalize:** next decide when the agreement will start, what you’ll do to make it successful, or how to avoid future conflicts. If you want, put your agreement in writing so that you’ll always have proof of what was agreed upon.

**Strategy:** now it’s time to put your joint ideas into action. Your resolution to the conflict is more likely to work if it’s not too complicated, so keep it simple. In a couple of weeks set up some time to check in with each other to see if it’s working and see what changes, if any, need to be made.
## Problem Solving Negotiation

### Planning Worksheet

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concrete ISSUES</th>
<th>Relationship ISSUES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>My INTERESTS</th>
<th>Their INTERESTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OPTIONS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STANDARDS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PROPOSALS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Joann has been working with Ben for five weeks to help him find a full time job. Initially things started off really well. Ben expressed a lot of enthusiasm about work and was able to articulate his job skills and career preferences. Joann was able to find a job for him in a couple of weeks that he seemed happy with. Then, within a few days, he quit abruptly. When she asked him why, he gave a vague reason that didn’t make sense. Joann redoubled her efforts and was lucky enough to run into a restaurant owner who needed some full time holiday help. Ben got the job and initially seemed happy with it. However, after one week Ben quit without giving any notice to his boss. Joann started to feel as if Ben didn’t really want to work. When they first started working together he seemed so enthusiastic, which only made his recent behavior more confusing. Recently, he’d started missing appointments or showing up so late that Joann had to reschedule him because she was working with another customer. Joann hated to admit it, but she wondered if Ben disrespected her efforts because she was a woman. Joann decided that she needed to stop wasting her employer resources. She felt that to be able to really help Ben she needed to set up a constructive plan that would help her to understand his needs and help them to work together more successfully.
### Planning Worksheet Case Example

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concrete ISSUES</th>
<th>Relationship ISSUES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Ben quits jobs repeatedly without notice</td>
<td>• Lack of trust in Ben’s desire to work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Won’t provide a good reason</td>
<td>• Feeling disrespected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Misses or is late for appointments.</td>
<td>• Feeling confused</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>My INTERESTS</th>
<th>Their INTERESTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Help Ben get a long-term job</td>
<td>• Getting and keeping a good job</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Find a job that pays well</td>
<td>• Being respected by family and friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Help Ben do work he likes</td>
<td>• Career advancement</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### OPTIONS

- Meet with Ben to discuss situation
- Develop an informal “contract” outlining each party’s rights and responsibilities.
- Meet with family and friends (with Ben’s consent)

### STANDARDS

- DOL regulations
- Contract responsibilities
- Personnel policies
- Resolution acceptable to both parties

### PROPOSALS

**IDEAL:** Schedule a meeting with Ben, develop a behavioral plan, follow up with Ben regularly to assess plan effectiveness and make changes. **ACCEPTABLE:** Ben agrees not to quit job without prior discussion. Ben develops understanding of acceptable reasons for job termination. Ben can verbalize family’s objections to the job he has.
Resolution Pyramid: “Bumping it Up”

A last resort...

Mediation, Arbitration, Litigation

**Mediation**

A process where a neutral third party helps individuals negotiate an acceptable resolution to their conflict.

**Arbitration**

A process whereby a neutral third party has the authority to make decisions about how a dispute will be resolved. Arbitration typically lacks the legal power to enforce compliance with the decision made.

**Litigation**

A process whereby people with disagreements go to court to have their dispute settled in a formal manner by a judge. Courts have the power to enforce their decisions.
Know your BATNA

BATNA stands for: Best Alternative to a Negotiated Agreement.

Having a BATNA, a back up plan, is the best way to protect yourself prior to a negotiation and it helps you to provide leverage in a negotiation. Developing your BATNA is as simple as asking yourself the following questions:

1. What is the best thing that could happen if the negotiation goes my way?

2. What is the worst thing that could happen if the negotiation doesn’t go my way?

3. If I don’t talk to XXX what are some other things that I can do to manage this situation?

4. If I talk to XXX and we can’t come to an agreement, what can I realistically do to deal with this situation?
**Initiate and Listen**
- If you are aware that something is wrong, be the first to bring it up.
- Set the tone for the discussion by your calm attitude and willingness to discuss and resolve the situation.
- Initiate discussion at a place and time that is safe and good for all.
- Listen, Listen, Listen, and listen some more.
- Find out what is really being said -- listen behind the words.
- You don’t have to agree with everything that is said, but hear it out.
- Clarify what you are hearing – restate what you hear, ask questions.
- Respect differences in communication styles and cultural differences in approaching conflict.

**Don’t be a Trigger**
- Avoid using language that triggers – reframe to neutral language.
- Use “I” rather than “You.”
- Don’t over react – your attitude and actions will increase or decrease the conflict.
- Don’t get sucked into side issues – ignore challenges. Focus on the issues.
- Be careful of your non-verbal communication. What is your body saying?

**Set Respectful Limits**
- Be clear about limits and consequences.
- Don’t threaten. State facts, don’t make the person feel threatened.
- If the discussion gets out of control, take a break, make an exit, and/or get help.
- Never use violence or physical means to set a limit.
  Resume when things have cooled off.

**Find Win-Win Solutions**
- Generate solutions that meet the needs of each person.
- Know that the real needs might not be what is initially stated.
- Make sure everyone walks away with something.
- Use a fair process for deciding – even when you need to exert authority.
- Check in later – is the solution working, did the process of resolving the situation work?

Thanks for joining us today!