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Five Major Conflict Management Styles*

Knowing when and how to use each style can help control conflict and lead to an improved working environment, resulting in a better bottom line.

Collaborating Style: A combination of being assertive and cooperative, those who collaborate attempt to work with others to identify a solution that fully satisfies everyone's concerns. In this style, which is the opposite of avoiding, both sides can get what they want and negative feelings are minimized. "Collaborating works best when the long-term relationship and outcome are important—for example, planning for integrating two departments into one, where you want the best of both in the newly formed department," Dr. Benoliel says.

Competing Style: Those who compete are assertive and uncooperative and willing to pursue one's own concerns at another person's expense. Dr. Benoliel explains using this style works when you don't care about the relationship but the outcome is important, such as when competing with another company for a new client. But, she cautions, "Don't use competing inside your organization; it doesn't build relationships."

Avoiding Style: Those who avoid conflict tend to be unassertive and uncooperative while diplomatically sidestepping an issue or simply withdrawing from a threatening situation. "Use this when it is safer to postpone dealing with the situation or you don't have as great a concern about the outcome, such as if you have a conflict with a co-worker about their ethics of using FaceTime on the job."

Accommodating Style: The opposite of competing, there is an element of self-sacrifice when accommodating to satisfy the other person. While it may seem generous, it could take advantage of the weak and cause resentment. "You can use accommodating when you really don't care a lot about the outcome but do want to preserve or build the relationship," Dr. Benoliel says, "such as going out for lunch with the boss and agreeing, 'If you want to go for Thai food for lunch, that's OK with me.'"

Compromising Style: This style aims to find an expedient, mutually acceptable solution that partially satisfies both parties in the conflict while maintaining some assertiveness and cooperativeness. "This style is best to use when the outcome is not crucial and you are losing time; for example, when you want to just make a decision and move on to more important things and are willing to give a little to get the decision made," Dr. Benoliel says. "However," she adds, "be aware that no one is really satisfied."

“It’s incredibly important to not be afraid when conflict arises because there are things you can do, such as becoming more skilled and qualified by building a repertoire for responding to reduce conflict,” says Dr. Benoliel.

Conflict Resolution Examples

Every conflict is different, and there isn't a one-size-fits-all approach to solving each one. Each style has its own strengths and weaknesses that make it effective depending on the conflict it's used in. Take a look at these five examples that outline how these conflict resolution styles can be used in real-life situations.

1. Accommodating an Angry Customer

Company policy can often be a roadblock to customer success, and it can put employees in a difficult position when dealing with a frustrated customer.

Imagine that you have a long line in your store and at the front is a customer who's demanding your employee to give them a refund. The customer's purchase was made over a year ago which is well past the company's “firm” one-month return policy. As your rep unsuccessfully tries to explain this to the customer, impatient people waiting at the back of the line are starting to return their products and leave the store.

This puts employees in a tricky situation where they need to fulfill both the customer's needs as well as the company's. In these cases, an accommodation approach is the best strategy because it produces a beneficial outcome for all parties involved.

The customer gets a refund, the other customers in line think this is great customer service, and the company doesn't lose any additional sales. Even though you may need to break company policy, rule-bending for one customer can end up saving your business with other customers who may be standing by.

2. Avoiding a Trivial Argument

The customer is always right — at least that's what the customer thinks. Customers like to be right and aren't easily swayed when your business tells them otherwise. Even if the detail is trivial, customers will take the time to argue their point which negatively impacts customer experience.

This type of situation occurs regularly with technical support teams who deal with complex or intricate products. Customers will call support lines claiming a product or feature is broken and the rep will find that the customer simply wasn't using the tool correctly. Support reps will ask customers if they tried following the recommended troubleshooting steps and customers, thinking the rep is being redundant, will say they have. However, when they actually go through the steps with the rep they realize the mistakes they had been making all along.

Whenever a customer claims your product or feature is broken and you know that it isn't, the best conflict management approach is to avoid. If your product isn't broken, then there's no need to waste time arguing with the customer over whether or not they completed certain troubleshooting steps.

Instead, go through the steps with them and show them that the product works. The customer will be smart enough to realize that user error may have played a larger role than they originally had thought.

3. Compromising When Reaching an Impasse

Customers, whether they feel like it or not, are logical humans just like you and me. They're capable of recognizing stressful and difficult situations, and they aren't interested in escalating them either. Customers are willing to come to a comprise so long as it allows them to continue working towards their goals.

One example of this can be seen in the food-service industry. Have you ever ordered a late-night pizza only to be disappointed that the toppings were wrong? Even though you're rightfully frustrated, you're probably not grabbing your keys and driving straight for the store.

Instead, most customers will call the business to report the issue. If it's before closing hours, the restaurant will send a complimentary pizza. But, if it's after-hours, the store will compromise with the customer by offering store credit for a future purchase.

While the customer may still be sad and hungry, they'll often be sympathetic to the employees who are about to clock out. Rather than making employees work longer and deliver another pizza, the company compromises with the customer by offering a free pizza at another time. Both parties had to make a small sacrifice but in the end they each profit from the outcome.

4. Collaborate With Willing Customers

The best resolutions to conflicts are the ones where both parties benefit without having to give up anything else in return. These situations are ideal for building customer loyalty but can be difficult to create and recognize. When your company does find chances to collaborate with your customers, it's important to capitalize on these opportunities and develop mutually beneficial relationships.

A real-life example of collaboration is the HubSpot Ideas Forum. This site operates as an open forum where customers can propose new ideas for HubSpot products. Users can upvote each other's ideas as well as comment on them to further emphasize a point.

HubSpot's developers closely monitor this forum to discover new ideas for product development. If they find an idea they like, they can mark the post to let the community know that the feature is being considered.

This collaboration benefits both HubSpot and its customers because both sides are profiting from the website. On one end, the customers have an outlet to voice their continuous needs to the business and potentially receive new products. On the other end, HubSpot is able to collect customer feedback and use it to create effective products and features. Both sides are gaining resources that help them achieve their goals without having to sacrifice anything in return.

5. Competing for the Right Reasons

Some customers have a goal in mind and simply won't stop until they achieve it, regardless of the consequences. While this mindset sounds great for running a business, it can create serious conflicts in other environments.

For example, let's say a disgruntled customer walks into your store and begins insulting other customers, unprovoked. The customer makes offensive comments and actively tries to emotionally or even physically harm other customers.

This is a conflict where the best course of action is to compete with the customer. The customer is not only causing a distraction to your business but is creating an atmosphere that makes other customers feel threatened. No matter how much money this customer spends at your business, it will always be worth confronting them because it shows other customers that you value their business just as much.

