

## 12.6 CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

Before we leave this chapter, one last question to address is how to manage or resolve conflict? Several styles or techniques have been suggested for managing conflict. Based on styles of assertiveness (the extent to which one wants one's goals met) and cooperativeness (the extent to which one wants to see the other party's concerns met), Thomas<sup>8</sup> has classified conflict management styles into five styles: avoiding, accommodating, competing, compromising, and collaborating. Following Fig. 12.5 graphs these five conflict management styles using these two dimensions.

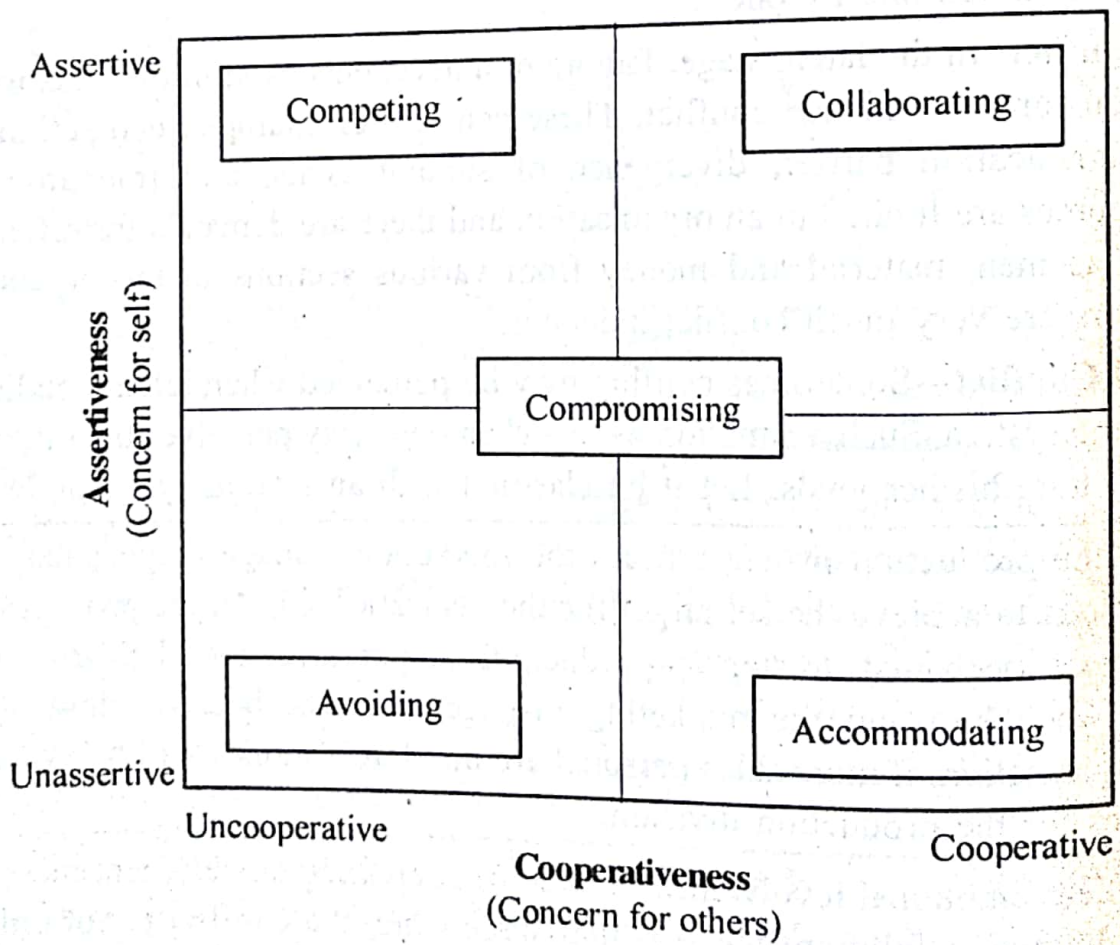


Fig. 12.5: Conflict Management Styles

Each of these styles is discussed now.

**Avoiding:** Avoiding is a style low on both assertiveness and cooperativeness. Avoiding is a deliberate decision to sidestep a conflictful issue, postpone addressing it till later or withdraw from a conflicting situation. In certain situations, it may be appropriate to avoid a conflict. For example, when parties are much angry and need time to cool down, it may be best to use avoidance. Avoiding conflict can be very functional when the issue involved in the conflict is trivial. However, research shows that overuse of this style results in negative evaluations from others in the workplace<sup>9</sup>. Here is an example of the avoiding style of conflict management in use.

The head of a large MNC stayed regularly in a posh five star hotel in Delhi. On one such trip, he forgot to remove the "Do Not Disturb" sign from his door when he left for work in the morning. He came back late at night to find his room as he had left it: the sheets unchanged, the breakfast tray still there, and the room unswept. The sign on the door was intact.

His reaction? He charged down to the reception, sign in hand, and proceeded to scream the hotel down. When the receptionist said that they were merely following his instructions, he got even more agitated, saying that he could have died in his room, and nobody would've disturbed him.

The situation was rapidly spiralling out of control, when the hotel's General Manager stepped in. Within minutes, he had pacified the charged executive, apologising profusely instead of arguing with him. He then put him in a better room till his room was made up, and sent him dinner. Suitably mollified, the guest was soon tucking into his food all anger forgotten, and the staff heaved a sigh of relief.

**Accommodating:** A style in which one is concerned that other party's goals be met but relatively unconcerned with getting one's own way is called accommodating. In this style, one party is willing to self-sacrifice in the interest of the other party. Overreliance on accommodating has its dangers. If manager constantly defers to others, others may lose respect for him. In addition, accommodating manager may become frustrated as his/her own needs are never met. In turn, he/she may lose self-esteem.

**Competing:** This type of style is characterised by high assertion and low cooperation. In this style, one tries to meet one's goals at the other party's expense. Much reliance on competing strategy may be dangerous because one who does so may become reluctant to admit even when he/she is wrong. He/she may find himself/herself surrounded by people who are afraid to disagree with him/her.

**Compromising:** The compromising style is intermediate on both the assertive and cooperative dimensions. Each party tries to give up something to reach a solution to the conflict. A typical "give and take" policy dominates the behaviour of the conflicting parties. Compromises are often made in the final hours of union—management negotiations, when time is of the essence. Compromising becomes an effective style when efforts toward collaboration have failed<sup>10</sup>.

**Collaborating:** Collaborating style is marked by both high assertiveness and cooperativeness. Collaborating involves attempts to satisfy the needs of both the parties. Thus, it is based on "win-win" style. In this style, a creative solution usually emerges because of the joint efforts of both the parties who are keen on both gaining from the situation without hurting the other.

Now, appropriate situations for using each conflict management style are listed in Table 12.1.

Table 12.1: Uses of Five Styles of Conflict Management

Conflict-Handling Style	Appropriate Situation
<p><b>Competing</b></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. When quick, decisive action is vital (e.g., emergencies).</li> <li>2. On important issues where unpopular actions need implementing (e.g., cost cutting, enforcing unpopular rules, discipline).</li> <li>3. On issues vital to company welfare when you know you are right.</li> <li>4. Against people who take advantage of noncompetitive behaviour.</li> </ol>
<p><b>Collaborating</b></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. To find an integrative solution when both sets of concerns are too important to be compromised.</li> <li>2. When your objective is to learn.</li> <li>3. To merge insights from people with different perspectives.</li> <li>4. To gain commitment by incorporating concerns into a consensus.</li> <li>5. To work through feelings that have interfered with a relationship.</li> </ol>
<p><b>Compromising</b></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. When goals are important, but not worth the effort or potential disruption of more assertive modes.</li> <li>2. When opponents with equal power are committed to mutually exclusive goals.</li> <li>3. To achieve temporary settlements to complex issues.</li> <li>4. To arrive at expedient solutions under time pressure.</li> <li>5. As a backup when collaboration or competition is unsuccessful.</li> </ol>
<p><b>Avoiding</b></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. When an issue is trivial, or more important issues are pressing.</li> <li>2. When you perceive no chance of satisfying your concerns.</li> <li>3. When potential disruption outweighs the benefits of resolution.</li> <li>4. To let people cool down and regain perspective.</li> <li>5. When gathering information supersedes immediate decision.</li> <li>6. When other can resolve the conflict more effectively.</li> <li>7. When issues seem tangential or symptomatic of other issues.</li> </ol>
<p><b>Accommodating</b></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. When you find you are wrong to allow a better position to be heard, to learn, and to show your reasonableness.</li> <li>2. When issues are more important to others than to yourself to satisfy others and maintain cooperation.</li> <li>3. To build social credits for later issues.</li> <li>4. To minimize loss when you are outmatched and losing.</li> <li>5. When harmony and stability are especially important.</li> <li>6. To allow employees to develop by learning from mistakes.</li> </ol>

SOURCE: K.W. Thomas, "Toward Multi-Dimensional Values in Teaching: The Example of Conflict Behaviours", *Academy of Management Review* 2(1977), 484-490.