

The Management Moment

Column Editor: Edward L. Baker

Building Conflict Competence

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Public health managers are now, more than ever, faced by a widening range of conflict-laden situations. As government budgets are cut, staff conflicts are increasing. Furthermore, public health leaders are involved in increasingly heated conflicts within communities they serve, as budget cuts cause reduced public health service delivery. Within our national Public Health Leadership Institute, we were recently asked by current scholars to advise them on the knowledge and skills needed to become more “conflict-competent” managers and leaders. In this column, we will be discussing our approach to enhancing awareness of conflict management style, understanding the implications of style on the performance of fellow workers and organizations, and developing skills to become more competent in dealing with conflict in the workplace.

● Increasing Awareness of Conflict Management Style

Each of us has a preferred style in dealing with conflict. Some are more assertive; others are more cooperative. Our mode of dealing with conflict is determined by our style, our skills, and the situation in which we are operating. In our Public Health Leadership Institute, we have used a self-administered tool—the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument¹—to help public health leaders better understand their own style in addressing conflict.

The instrument characterizes conflict-handling modes into 5 categories:

- *Competing*: “My way or the highway”
- *Accommodating*: “It would be my pleasure”
- *Avoiding*: “I’ll think about it tomorrow”
- *Collaborating*: “Two heads are better than one”
- *Compromising*: “Let’s make a deal”

The results of our scholars’ self-assessments are interesting. The most common conflict-handling modes were avoiding, accommodating, and compromising. Very few identified competing as their preferred mode; a few preferred collaborating.

● Understanding the Implications of a preferred mode of conflict handling

As we become more aware of our preferred mode of handling conflict, we need to enhance our knowledge of the implications of our preferred style as it impacts our coworkers and the performance of our organization. For example, overuse of conflict avoidance behavior can cause problems to fester and lead to “decision by default.” Conversely, underuse of avoidance behavior can create a climate of hostility and work overload as a result of taking on too many causes. In this regard, Reinhold Niebuhr’s Serenity Prayer seems applicable:

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference.

Each of the 5 modes of conflict handling may be overused or underused. To be most effective, conflict competent managers need to combine awareness of their own preferred mode with an understanding of the implications of overuse and underuse of each mode. Each conflict mode has its usefulness depending on the context. For example, when advocating for resources during the setting of the health department’s budget, the “competing” mode might be appropriate to secure

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resources for your programs, but the compromising mode might also come into play in some contexts. With trusted partners and no time pressure, collaboration may be appropriate. To be a conflict-competent leader, we must develop the *cognitive* skills to recognize the most appropriate mode, the *emotional* intelligence to maintain our composure in order to exercise the most appropriate mode, and the *behavioral* skills to call upon the most relevant mode in any given situation.

● Developing the Skills to Become a More Conflict Competent Manager

Conflict management is a learned skill. A combination of emotional and behavioral skills can be developed and refined such that we become more conflict competent leaders.²

Conflict is all about emotion. Effective leaders are skilled at managing their own emotions in a way that provides a solid foundation from which to choose constructive behavioral responses. One must develop the skill to regulate emotional balance and slow down to allow time to cool down.

Behavioral skills include engaging with others constructively by

- understanding others' perspectives, emotions, and needs;
- sharing one's own thoughts, feelings, and experiences;
- collaborating to develop creative solutions; and
- reaching out to get communication restarted once it has stalled.

In addition to these constructive behaviors, conflict competent managers avoid destructive behaviors particularly by *reducing "fight or flight" responses* to conflict. This is often difficult. Conflict triggers emotionally driven automatic behavioral responses learned over years; destructive responses may emerge as reactive behaviors designed for self-protection. Thus, emotional awareness and regulation are central to becoming more conflict competent.

● The Path of conflict: Choosing constructive responses

Once a precipitating event initiates conflict, the manager may have the opportunity to choose a constructive response by modeling a set of behaviors to keep the conflict contained:

- Manage the tone of the conversation (*humor can help!*).

- Focus on the conflict of ideas and avoid a conflict of *individuals*.
- Focus on task, situation, and problem-solving.
- Avoid focusing on personal issues or attacks.
- Contain negative emotions (eg, open expressions of anger or frustration).

● Hot Buttons

To navigate the dynamic challenges inherent in conflict, skilled managers must be aware of "hot buttons"—people or situations that irritate one enough to provoke conflict by producing destructive responses. The "hotter" the button, the more likely it is to produce strong expressions of negative emotions, feelings of personal provocation, automatic and impulsive responding, and increased tension. A few typical "hot buttons" are micromanaging, being unreliable, unappreciative, untrustworthy, abrasive, or aloof.

● Constructive Responses to Conflict: "7 Habits of Conflict Competent Managers"

Conflict competent managers can employ a range of constructive responses to conflict that include both active and passive modes of addressing a conflict-laden situation.² These are

1. taking a different perspective,
2. creating solutions,
3. expressing emotions,
4. reaching out,
5. thinking reflectively,
6. delaying a response, and
7. adapting.

The benefits of these approaches include a focus on creative problem solving, expression of positive emotions, and ultimately to conflict resolution. In addition, by adopting a more skilled approach to conflict management, public health managers can enhance the cohesiveness and performance of the teams that they lead.

● Conclusion

Building conflict competence requires the personal and group skill to adopt a "cool down, slow down, and engage constructively" model that fosters open and honest discussion, develops trust and safety, promotes collaboration, and enhances team emotional intelligence.

The process begins with each manager developing a heightened awareness of his or her own conflict-handling mode, along with an awareness of the implications of overuse and underuse of these modes and

a recognition that each conflict mode has its usefulness depending on the situation. Finally, public health managers must practice constructive behaviors as they continue along the path to becoming more conflict competent manager.

REFERENCES

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