# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>The Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>How to Orchestrate Conflict</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>The Conflict Dynamic Profile (CDP)</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Constructive Responses – Active</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Constructive Responses – Passive</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Destructive Responses – Active</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Destructive Responses – Passive</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>What to Do: Ten Types of Defensiveness</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Hot Buttons</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Competing: Going Toe-to-Toe</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Managing Conflict</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Influence Tactics</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Building Relationships</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>References</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Notes</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

Conflict is a natural part of modern business. The conflicts between central vs. local control and between business units and functions are routine and will not go away any time in the foreseeable future. Doing business and accomplishing goals requires that we get better skilled at managing conflict.

We are often advised to take the emotion out of the conflict. That would be good if it were doable. The most difficult conflicts are full of emotion that is not easily removed because each party has a lot at stake from bonus, performance, recognition to being a valued contributor whose opinion is sought.

We can learn to take the personal tension out of the conflict. And, we can learn techniques for tackling conflict.

Potential Consequences of Conflict

Potential Benefits

- Stimulates creativity
- Helps problem solving
- Fosters teamwork
- Encourages listening
- Improves perspective taking
- Promotes open communication
- Yields information about people
- Yields information about the situation
- Signals that changes are needed
- Can clear the air
- Allows for emotional expression

Potential Costs

- Produces bad decisions
- Poisons relationships
- Disrupts self, others at work
- Causes anger, fear
- Increases defensiveness
- Hurts relationship building
- Inhibits open communication
- Reduces collaboration
- Can lead to retaliation
- Harms reputations
- Derails careers

The Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI)

There are five distinct strategies for ways to approach conflict. All are valid and all have a place and time. Using one to the exclusion of the other, however, creates problems.

The five strategies are arrayed on two dimensions. The X-axis is the degree of cooperation with the other person or in effect the degree to which you give in. The Y-axis is the degree of assertiveness, or the degree to which you push for what you want.

The chart on page 7 summarizes these five strategies.

- **Collaborating**, in the upper right hand corner is the ultimate in win-win. This is the stock and trade of negotiating. Both of you spend the time to learn what each wants and to develop a solution that gives both of you what you want.

- **Compromising**, in the middle, is the quick solution. Neither of you wins but neither of you loses. You both give a little and you both get a little.

- **Avoiding**, in the bottom left, while frustrating if you are waiting for a decision, is a wise strategy in some cases. In effect, both of you avoid reaching a conclusion. You don’t necessarily avoid each other and it should not be a permanent state of affairs. However, there are times, for example, when other information or other decisions will make a solution to your conflict easier. In those cases, avoiding a conclusion can be wise.

- **Competing**, in the upper left corner, is when you fight for what you want. There are times when you should fight but this should not be the only strategy you use. Often senior leaders give the advice to “choose your battles.” They also say that you should only have one battle at a time and sometimes no battle. If the battle is not that important to you, don’t compete.

- **Accommodating**, in the bottom right, occurs when you give in to what the other person wants. Here, you might decide the other person had a valid point of view, that it was more important to the other person than to you, or that you want to preserve the relationship.

All of us are capable of using all five strategies; however, we typically have a dominant style and a secondary style. Those styles then become part of our reputation. Others learn how to approach us based on that reputation; thus limiting options that might have worked. For example, if you always compromise then someone approaching you on a conflict would be highly unlikely to try to collaborate and if you suddenly decided to compete, he/she would be quite surprised.
Five Strategies for Ways to Approach Conflict

- Competing
- Collaborating
- Compromising
- Avoiding
- Accommodating

From Thomas-Kilmann Index
How to Orchestrate Conflict

3 a Think Carefully about Your Opening

The first minute sets the tone for what will happen in a conversation. Think carefully about how you will put the other person at ease – consider location, rapport building and your opening line.

3 b Get the Balance Right on these Continuums

- Winning at all costs
- Yielding too often

There are times to give in and there are times to hold your ground and fight for what you want. Winning all the time, never being wrong and never giving in will damage relationships. Giving in all the time does not work either.

- Defending your point
- Listening and engaging in dialogue to understand other’s point of view

There are times to defend your point of view and times to clearly articulate your logic. If you find yourself in an argument, then you are not likely to resolve the conflict. Try asking questions from a position of genuine interest and curiosity to further your understanding of how the other person sees the situation.

3 c Acknowledge the Points of Agreement

You probably agree on some things. Acknowledge them as a starting point. State what each of you disagree on and recognize your relative positions.
3 d | Stay Calm

Displaying anger, being out of control, and not remaining calm and collected in a crisis can become derailers, particularly if they occur often. However, staying calm does not mean ignoring the emotions that are present. Sometimes naming emotions or even showing emotions under control can be constructive.

3 e | Be Clear about What You Want as an Outcome

Too often we want too many things. Focus on the urgent one, at most two actions, for the most immediate interaction.

3 f | Understand the Exchange

What do you have to offer? What can you exchange?

3 g | Recognize the Impact on the Relationship

How important is this relationship to you?

How well established is it?

What can you do to maintain the connection or repair the damage?
The Conflict Dynamics Profile (CDP)

Four Themes

- The CDP is explicitly based on a behavioral orientation.
- Conflict can best be thought of as an unfolding process.
- The earliest responses to conflict have the largest effect on how conflict unfolds.
- People can change the way they respond to conflict.
- The more people know, the better equipped they will be to change.

Path to Conflict

Adapted from *Becoming a Conflict Competent Leader*, Craig E. Runde and Tim A. Flanagan.
### Responses to Conflict

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Constructive</th>
<th>Destructive</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Active</strong></td>
<td>• Perspective Taking</td>
<td>• Winning at All Costs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Creative Solutions</td>
<td>• Displaying Anger</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Expressing Emotions</td>
<td>• Demeaning Others</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Reaching Out</td>
<td>• Retaliating</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Passive</strong></td>
<td>• Reflective Thinking</td>
<td>• Avoiding</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Delay Responding</td>
<td>• Yielding</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Adapting</td>
<td>• Hiding Emotions</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>• Self-criticizing</td>
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Craig E. Runde, Tim A. Flanagan. Becoming a Conflict Competent Leader, p 47.
### Constructive Responses – Active

#### 5 a Perspective Taking
- Trying to put yourself in the other person’s shoes.
- Seeking to understand the other person’s point of view.
- “I would like to understand how you see the situation. Please tell me what you think (what’s on your mind).”
- Listen – actively.
- Only ask clarifying questions.
- Do not state your point of view.

#### 5 b Creating Solutions
- Brainstorming with the other person.
- Trying to generate alternatives.
- Identifying points of agreement.
- “There must be a solution that works for both of us.” OR “I would like to try to find a mutual solution.”
- “Let’s engage the team in brainstorming options.”

#### 5 c Expressing Emotions
- Talking honestly with the other person about your own feelings and thoughts.
- Communicating honestly and accurately.
- Knowing what you think and feel and what you want to say.
- Explaining why you feel the way you feel.
- “I feel frustrated that we have taken so much time and still don’t have a solution.”
### 5 d | Reaching Out

- Making the first move to break a stalemate or make amends.
- Encouraging the other person to express his/her thoughts and feelings.
- Empathizing or apologizing as appropriate.
- “I wanted to check in with you on how you are thinking/feeling about the situation.”
- “I would like to offer a different approach.”
- “I realize I did not handle the last conversation as smoothly as I would have liked. I’d like to try again.”

### 5 e | What to Do: Perspective Taking Assessment

- Summarize the nature of the conflict. How long has the conflict existed?
- From your point of view:
  - What is your point of view?
  - What is your main objective and why is it important?
  - What are the weak points in your position?
- From the other’s point of view:
  - Does <insert your name here> seem collaborative and open-minded?
  - What is it like dealing with <insert your name here>?
  - What do I (the other person) care about the most?
- Where are the points of agreement?
Constructive Responses – Passive

6 a Reflective Thinking

- Analyzing the situation in private, weighing the pros and cons.
- Thinking about the best response before taking action.

6 b Delay Responding

- Taking a break, taking a time-out, leaving the situation with the intent of coming back when emotions are less intense.
- Letting things calm down.
- Waiting for the right moment.

6 c Adapting

- Being flexible.
- Trying to make the best of the circumstances.
- Accepting the current situation and recognizing that things may not change.
### Destructive Responses – Active

<table>
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<tr>
<th><strong>7 a</strong></th>
<th><strong>Winning at All Costs</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>• Trying hard to prevail.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Continually fighting for your point.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Arguing your own position.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• “I am not giving up, or compromising, on this issue.”</td>
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<tr>
<th><strong>7 b</strong></th>
<th><strong>Displaying Anger</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>• Showing anger – raising your voice, using harsh words.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Often seen as aggressive, particularly when the anger is out of control.</td>
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<th><strong>7 c</strong></th>
<th><strong>Demeaning Others</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>• Laughing at the other person.</td>
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<td>• Ridiculing, making fun of the other person.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Putting the other person down – in front of the person or behind his/her back.</td>
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<th><strong>7 d</strong></th>
<th><strong>Retaliating</strong></th>
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<td>• Getting even.</td>
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<td>• Getting revenge.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Obstructing the other person.</td>
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Destructive Responses – Passive

8 a Avoiding
- Keeping your distance from the other person.
- Being aloof.
- Deliberately ignoring the other person.

8 b Yielding
- Giving in to make the conflict go away.

8 c Hiding Emotions
- Concealing your true emotions.
- Holding your emotions inside, at the wrong time.

8 d Self Criticizing
- Blaming yourself.
- Reviewing the situation and thinking about what you wish you had done differently – too much so.
What to Do: Ten Types of Defensiveness

1. **Denying responsibility:** “This is your fault.”

2. **Making excuses:** “I couldn’t help being late. If Group B would get information to me on time this would not happen.”

3. **Mind-reading and assuming a negative motive:** “He/she gave me numbers at the last minute so I would not have a complete picture.”

4. **Cross-complaining:**
   – Person #1: “You didn’t leave enough time for my presentation.”
   – Person #2: “Your last presentation was too long.”

5. **Bouncing it back:**
   – Person #1: “You don’t listen to me.”
   – Person #2: “Well, you don’t listen to me.”

6. **Countering:** “Yes, but . . .” “We could try your idea, but it won’t work.”

7. **Repeating yourself syndrome:** When one or both people keeps repeating the same response instead of trying to move the conversation forward.

8. **Whining:** The tone of voice sends the implicit message “I’m the victim here—not you. Why are you picking on me?”

9. **Body language or facial expressions:** Rolling the eyes, crossing the arms, turning your back to your colleague, walking out of the room in the middle of a tense conversation.


Adapted from the collected works of John Gottman, PhD and from the work of Robert Ferguson, PhD.

### 9 a Reframing Emotions

Reframe each of the following so that you are taking ownership for the emotion and presenting it even-handedly:

- “You never give me any guidance or direction. How am I supposed to know what to do?”
- “Why can’t you get anything done on time?”
- “You don’t have any confidence in me because you change everything I write.”
- “Will you please let someone else talk for a change?”
- “Could you just show up for one meeting on time for a change?”
Hot Buttons

Sometimes people engage in behaviors that just irritate others often enough to provoke destructive reactions. There is probably no ill-intent; it’s just what people do, especially under stress. These behaviors can create stress in us because they get to us – they tap a particularly important belief or value.

People vary in what is most irritating to them. What annoys one person can cause no problem for another.

Keep in Mind the “Hotter” the Hot Button, the More Likely It Is to Produce:

- Strong negative emotions
- Feelings of personal provocation
- Automatic and impulsive responding
- Increased tension

Things People Do that Create Stress

Unreliable – those who are unreliable, miss deadlines, cannot be counted on
Overly analytical – those who are perfectionists, over-analyze things, focus too much on minor issues
Unappreciative – those who fail to give credit to others or seldom praise good performance
Aloof – those who isolate themselves, do not seek input from others, are hard to approach
Micro-managing – those who constantly monitor and check up on the work of others
Self-centered – those who are egotistical and believe they are always correct
Abrasive – those who are arrogant, sarcastic, abrasive
Untrustworthy – those who exploit others, take undeserved credit, cannot be trusted
Hostile – those who lose their temper, become angry, yell at others

Adapted from Becoming a Conflict Competent Leader, Craig E. Runde & Tim A. Flanagan.
**What to Do: Cooling Hot Buttons**

When a Hot Button has been pushed, you need several tactics you can use to calm yourself in order to better engage in constructive responses.

Most people have one or two techniques. However, we find people need four or five options. Below is a list of common techniques. All have been documented as stress reducers. Note what you typically do. Identify two more you can add to your repertoire.

- Go to a different environment.
- Engage in a physical activity.
- Use positive self-talk.
- Pause, even if briefly.
- Breathe.
- Meditate, pray, etc.
- Learn biofeedback techniques.
- Manage grudges.
- Think of three concrete positive events.
- Practice optimism – stop negative thoughts.
- Learn to relax with uncertainty.

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<tr>
<th>Techniques You Currently Use</th>
<th>Techniques You Could Add</th>
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Competing: Going Toe-to-Toe

At times you need to compete for your agenda – it’s the right thing for you, your team and the organization. We have lots of information on how to collaborate (see Getting to Yes) but little insight on how to compete effectively. So what can you do without getting tagged as “overly aggressive?”

Strategies and Principles

Chose your battles. You cannot fight battles all the time – or at least not if you want to succeed. Choose one and have times when there are no battles.

Find allies. Early on, test your perspective with people you trust. Find others who will support your case. Trades (exchanges) often help here.

Use rational logic. Make your case more persuasive than the others. But be cautious. This approach can easily tip over into arrogance.

Appeal to higher authorities. Force a decision at a higher level. But be prepared to lose.

Avoid threats. Threats are unpleasant for everyone and they create enemies. Plus you must be prepared to carry through on the threat. And, you have to expect the other will retaliate.

Watch body language. Notice your body posture. What are you signaling intentionally or unintentionally? Consider things such as height, leaning forward, looking from the side, facial expressions, holding eye contact, and proximity, to name a few.

Key Points

- Going toe-to-toe happens; use sparingly.
  - Is this really worth the risk?
- Think about the potential reactions.
  - Know as much as you can about where others stand on the issue at hand.
- Align with allies.
  - Do not go it alone.
- When conflict and tension arises, how you handle the first few moments makes a huge difference.
  - De-escalate, decrease defenses (yours and others), calm yourself.
  - Either seek perspective, express positive emotions and common agreements, brainstorm alternatives or reach out.
  - Do not allow your Hot Buttons to rule the interaction.
We sometimes allow negative thoughts to spin out of control so much so that we cannot see the logical next steps. The cycle starts with some precipitating event (Adverse Event such as a mistake) that triggers a Belief (such as no mistakes are tolerated here). In our minds, this leads immediately to a Consequence (such as I will get fired).

You stop the negative cycle by disputing with yourself.

- What evidence exists?
- What other alternatives could exist?
- Even if true, what are the real implications?
- Even if true, how useful is the information?

This dispute releases energy and allows us to think more clearly and take positive action.
12 b  Your Task: Managing Conflict

- Work in small groups.
- Discuss potential conflicts for each challenge.

Identify the most important constructive behaviors for you as a leader to deploy.

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Specify at least three ways to avoid key destructive behaviors.

1. ______________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

2. ______________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

3. ______________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
## Influence Tactics

### Definitions

<table>
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<th>Style</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Pressure</strong></td>
<td>Uses demands, threats, frequent checking, or persistent reminders</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Legitimation Tactics</strong></td>
<td>Refers to rules, regulations, formal policies, manager’s authority or personal authority</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Rational Persuasion</strong></td>
<td>Uses logical arguments and factual evidence</td>
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<td><strong>Framing Gains</strong></td>
<td>Explains how request will be a benefit</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Inspirational Appeals</strong></td>
<td>Appeal to values and ideals or opportunity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Personal Appeals</strong></td>
<td>Based on friendship or personal favor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ingratiation</strong></td>
<td>Uses praise and flattery, expresses confidence in ability to have a positive impact</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Consultation</strong></td>
<td>Encourages suggestion of improvements, solicits perspectives</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Collaboration</strong></td>
<td>Offers to provide resources and assistance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Coalition Building</strong></td>
<td>Seeks help in persuading others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Exchange</strong></td>
<td>Exchange of favors or indicates willingness to reciprocate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Negotiating</strong></td>
<td>Seeking a give and take, bargaining</td>
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Adapted from Gary Yukl, *Leadership in Organizations* and Chris Musselwhite, *Influence Style Indicator.*
Establishing rapport is critical for building strong relationships in corporate life. We know from decades of research that we tend to like and trust people who are similar to us in some ways. (See Margaret Heffner, *Willful Blindness*, for a summary of this research.) For the average corporate relationship, a bit of common ground goes a long way. People who are good at building rapport report thinking about how to build it in advance of important encounters.

Below is a list of things you can easily discuss with others to find areas of common ground. This is not an exhaustive list but rather a starting point to stimulate your thinking. The key is to find something the two of you have in common and that you both enjoy discussing. Or as one very senior executive said, “I will learn more about you in two minutes of listening to you talk about anything you are passionate about than I will ever learn in a two hour presentation on your strategy.” By the way, he placed high value on the former.

- **Sports** - traditional team sports as well as non-traditional activities such as running, horseback riding, diving
- **University Clubs** - fraternities, sororities, sports clubs, special interest clubs
- **Travel** - places you both enjoy, types of trips you enjoy taking, places you have recently visited
- **Novels or Books**
- **Movies or Television Series**
- **Art** - museums, exhibits, art forms, architecture
- **Theatre** - plays, operas, dance
- **Music** - Concerts, groups, types of music
- **Newspaper Columns** - assuming there is common interest and views
- **Charities or Charitable Causes**
- **Hobbies**
- **Children** - particularly if your children are similar ages or have similar interests
Adapting Your Style

To enhance the effectiveness of the relationships around you and the success of your communication with people, you should always be able to adapt -- meaning to adjust how you deliver your message -- in order to have a stronger impact on the person you are trying to reach. This is not about changing the substance of the message, but rather about changing how you deliver the message. Again, the real test is whether or not your communication has better impact.

Now the question becomes how to identify what adaptations are helpful and how you make the appropriate adjustments. Below is a chart of significant dichotomies in style that are helpful to be aware of. The key in adapting is to start where the person you are trying to reach is more comfortable. For example, if the person you are working with is more detail oriented, start with detail -- do not try to force him or her to adopt your preference. Furthermore, anything you do to try to encourage, nudge, hint, insist that he or she adjust to your style is just an exercise in frustration for both of you -- leading to less trust, less effective communication and weaker results.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Detail Oriented - wants to know all of the facts and details</th>
<th>Big Picture Oriented - wants to know the general concept or theme</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Task Oriented - focuses on the facts, details and the task at hand, often very logical</td>
<td>Relationship Oriented - emotionally competent, focuses on relationships and the impact of decisions on relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In Charge - prefers to be in control, and to tell people what to do or how to do it</td>
<td>Lets Go - prefers to delegate, lets others decide how to do things</td>
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<tr>
<td>Extraverted - draws energy from talking to others, prefers talking as a way of thinking out loud</td>
<td>Intraverted - prefers time to reflect, draws energy from having time to think</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reserved - and private</td>
<td>Open - approachable and talkative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selective - in terms of who is included</td>
<td>Inclusive of many people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open-ended - flexible, adjusts plans often quickly</td>
<td>Structured - prefers to plan and to stick to those plans, adjusts slowly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rule Follower - prefers to stick with the rules and procedures, follows the tried and true methods</td>
<td>Rule Breaker - within legal and ethical bounds, challenges the rules, the process or the status quo; willing to bend the rules</td>
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<tr>
<td>Critical - with good intent</td>
<td>Optimistic - focuses on the upside</td>
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Strengthening Trust

We all know that trust is important -- if you trust someone it is easier to interact with him or her, you tend to listen to what he or she has to say, conflicts can more easily be resolved, and cooperation is better. There is also strong supporting evidence that trust leads to better performance.

However, trust in corporate life is hard to define and even harder to build. The models we use about trust in personal relationships assume long-term commitment and mutual interdependence. Neither hold true very often in corporate relationships over long periods of time. Dynamics in corporate life shift frequently.

We believe there are four reasons we trust others in corporate life.

1. **Expertise.** We trust the person’s expertise, knowledge and experience. We may not trust that person with anything else; however, in his or her realm of expertise, we trust his or her opinion.

2. **Role.** We trust the role the person is in, meaning we trust the systems and processes surrounding that role to be fair, honest and equitable.

3. **Network.** We trust our network -- someone in our network whom we trust knows and trust the person. Therefore, we trust this person (until proven otherwise).

4. **Personal Relationship.** We trust the person because of our experience with him or her, particularly in difficult circumstances. But we have to maintain contact and interaction in order to maintain trust in this case. We may have trusted someone three years ago, but haven’t seen him or her since; therefore, we have little trust today from the personal perspective.

Clarity about who you trust and why, as well as why you are trusted, helps eliminate disappointment.

What Can You Do to Improve Trust?

Clarify expectations. What is the other person expecting you to do and not do to assess the degree of trust they have in you? We all place different emphasis on behaviors that indicate trust, apart from basic honesty. Thus we can miss important expectations.

Minimize risk for the other person. Anything you can do that makes the other person more comfortable with the risk in trusting you is helpful. For example, more frequent updates, more transparency on data, more opportunities to alter the course, can help reduce the risk felt by the other person.

Increase degrees of freedom. If you want me to trust you and I have no means to counter negative results, no opportunity to correct errors before they become public, no political skills to navigate the organization, then I am going to be very slow to trust you. In this case, how can you help me feel that I have more options to manage the downsides?

Highlight your expertise. If your skill and expertise are required, the more I know about your expertise, the more likely I will trust you.

Expand your network and brand. The stronger your network and the more people who know you, know what you can do, and trust you, the easier it is for others to find someone in his or her network to speak on your behalf.

Adjust your style. The more you can adapt to the needs and style of others, the better you can communicate with others, the broader the range of people you can work with, then the easier it will be for you to get people to trust you at least in part.

Find common ground. The more others find someone they have in common with you, the more they are likely to trust you. The more “affable” you are, the more you are likely to be trusted.

REFLECTION

Think about a relationship in which you would like to build stronger trust. Which, if any, of the four reasons for trust are present at the moment? If none are present, then you have to start with expertise as a base. From the actions above, what can you do to build stronger trust?

References


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