

# What's Your Conflict Style?

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To communicate well is an important skill set you can develop with a little effort. This effort includes learning how to take the conflict we see in our professional lives and to choose the appropriate response style to best manage that conflict.

Social science research indicates that we tend to primarily use two of the five styles of conflict management which most closely correspond to conflict behaviors we observed in others early in life and to our natural personalities.

As attorneys, it is helpful to have an appreciation of these five styles and the tendencies associated with each one, and to learn how to shift between styles to not only respond to the present situation, but also to shape future conflict. The following is a summary of the five commonly identified conflict styles and situations where each might be used to achieve a specific goal:

**1. Avoidance** – People who use this style are generally uncomfortable in conflict situations. They typically put off discussing issues and attempt to cut off any discussion as quickly as possible, either by making a joke of it, acting upset or through trivializing it: ‘its not like I killed someone, I just forgot to \_\_\_\_\_’. People using this style are sometimes seen as uncooperative or uncaring, but may simply hope the situation will ‘work out’ or emotionally can’t or don’t want to deal with it.

**Attorneys may choose this style if the issue is unimportant to your client or if other parties should be taking responsibility.**

**2. Accommodation** – This style is characterized by choosing to keep quiet or to give in quickly to another’s point of view ‘for the sake of keeping the peace’. People using this style may be seen as easygoing, but are sometimes seen as passive. People using this style may feel that their needs or opinions are not as important as others or may feel that their sacrifice is unappreciated.

**Attorneys may use this style if there are likely to be long-term negative effects from being assertive or if the issue is not a critical one to your client.**

**3. Compromise** – People who use this style are generally comfortable in situations of conflict as long as they think a solution can be found where everyone has to make some sacrifice. People using this style are sometimes seen as horse-traders, ‘split the baby’ or

‘give a little and get a little’ thinkers. Compromisers do not avoid conflict; however they do not engage it fully.

**Attorneys may use this style if it satisfies the needs of their client, but should be careful to resist the tendency to concede disproportionately for the sake of an easy agreement.**

**4. Competitive** - This style can either be characterized by one who is aggressive and views his concerns or wants as more important than those of others, or it can be characterized by one who is assertive of his needs, while recognizing that others may have concerns as well. The aggressive type of competitor is not likely to cooperate with others in finding a solution, but will usually attempt to overpower others, while the assertive type usually can be an effective, but determined problem-solver.

**Attorneys may use the competitive / assertive style in a negotiation where you work to obtain the best practicable result for your client, while assisting your counterpart, where possible, in doing the same. Alternatively, attorneys may want to use the more aggressive aspects of this style if dealing with a counterpart who does not have an appreciation of, or a respect for, any style other than competitive / aggressive, or where a quick resolution of the issue is needed or where the issue is of supreme importance to your client.**

**5. Collaborative** – People who use this style are willing to engage conflict and to use resources to identify interests, needs and concerns of all parties. Solutions are viewed as good if they meet the needs of everyone to the extent possible, and where not possible, that a fair problem-solving process has been used.

**Attorneys may use this style when there are likely to be long-term positive outcomes. It is also useful when support for a decision is needed from a group of people, or where planning at the concept stage are essential to future implementation and overall success of the project.**

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