

“Gender Issues in Information Technology Study and Work Environment”
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Handout on power and conflict management strategies

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Understanding Conflict Management can help you to

- Understand other people's styles of conflict management and your own style.
- Understand how gender, culture, personality and personal history affect individual conflict management styles and strategies.
- Understand what strategies are appropriate for different situations.
- Develop your own skills in conflict management.

Why Conflict Management?

- Conflicts occur when different interests collide.
- Different interests come from differences in areas such as personality, values, loyalties and goals
- Most organisations encourage some conflict to ensure competition
- Conflict can be seen as useful if it is managed properly; it may create new ideas and avoid stagnation.
- If conflict is not managed properly it may damage an organisation and the personnel who work there.

Power, Balance and Domain

- Power may be official or legal, or it may be informal.
- Official power rests in a position/office (e.g. general manager, president) and usually includes control of resources and rules
- People have informal power through factors such as their knowledge and expertise, their personality and charm, or social status.
- Different powers may not be acceptable in certain contexts; for example informal power is irrelevant in university teaching where only rules and expertise matter.
- Social status may include factors such as gender, class or caste, race, religion, wealth or reputation.
- Perceived imbalance of power, lack of assertiveness lead many women to use avoiding and compromising styles
- If power is unbalanced and exercised wrongly, the 'victims' may use 'negative' power to obstruct, delay or sabotage work.

Examples of Strategies for Handling Conflict in Different Situations

Thomas-Kilman: Competing/Avoiding/Accommodating/Compromising/Collaborating based on (x) orientation and goals & (y) personal style

Example of Competing: For emergencies, unpopular decisions, and/or when people are uncooperative and unwilling to collaborate

- You are project manager for a company whose business is subject to financial penalties for not meeting deadlines. You fire a programmer who will not meet deadlines, despite two warnings.

Examples of Avoiding: For trivial issues, against power play, when you have no power, when others can do it more easily

- A project team consumes too much meeting time on unimportant issues. You avoid going to meetings, which deal with trivia.

- You are concerned that your superior has instructed you to do something unethical.
- You take sick leave to avoid a confrontation with your superior.

Example of Accommodating: When you are wrong, to allow others to win sometimes ('build credit'), to allow subordinates to learn by mistakes, to avoid loss of face.

- You support one of your project team's proposals even though you have a better solution.

Example of Compromising: When power is equal, collaboration hasn't worked, when a quick solution is needed

- You agree to reduce your requirements in exchange for a lower price, even though you are prepared to pay for a better product.

Examples of Collaborating: When agreement is more important than the task, to get commitment, to allow learning.

- You extend the deadline for a project or deliverable so that more people can contribute and there is better agreement.
- You compensate for this by compromising on another deliverable.

References and Useful Readings -

- Charobonneau, G.D (1998) Predictors of women's workplace conflict management styles, PhD dissertation, Wayne State University.
- Morgan, G. (1997) Images of organization. New ed. London, Sage, pp. 153-214
- Thomas, K. and Kilman, R (1974) Thomas-Kilman conflict mode instrument. Tuxedo, N.Y., XICOM
- Valentine, P.E.B (2001) A Gender perspective on conflict management strategies of nurses. Journal of Nursing Scholarship, First Quarter, pp 69-74
- More information may be found at the Conflict Management instrument website <http://www.kilmann.com/conflict.html>
- Websites which have guides to how survive office politics, conflict management:
- Career Testing Center "Rules for Office Politics" <http://www.cyberpsych.com/politics1.html>
- The Free Management Library "Basics of Conflict Management" <http://www.managementhelp.org/intrpsnl/basics.htm>