



# Understanding Conflict

## Parents as Collaborative Leaders Module 7

A collaborative research project hosted by the University of  
Vermont and the PACER Center

# Objectives



- Define various approaches to dealing with conflict
- Understand the uses, strengths and limitations of various approaches to conflict
- Reflect on personal strengths and challenges in relation to conflict, and the ways in which these can enhance or serve as a barrier to effective leadership and collaboration

# Essential Questions



- *What are some of the most common approaches to dealing with conflict, and what are their strengths and limitations in various situations?*
- *What approaches to conflict do you generally use, and how do these help or serve as barriers to your ability to be effective in situations involving conflict?*
- *In what ways might you improve your own practices related to managing and resolving conflict?*

# Agenda



- Discussion: *Why is it important to think about conflict? (5 minutes)*
- Group activity: *Strengths and limitations of personal conflict styles (20 minutes)*
- Power point presentation: *Approaches to conflict: What is your style? (15 minutes)*
- Activity in triads: *Applying conflict theories (15 minutes)*
- Closing discussion *(5 minutes)*

# Discussion: Thinking About Conflict



- Think about various teams or groups of which you have been a member. What types of conflict did your group experience? What factors may have led to this conflict?
- In what ways can conflict be beneficial to collaborative teams?
- In what ways can conflict be challenging to collaborative teams?
- What can you and other team members do when conflict arises?

# Overview of the Five Conflict Response Styles



- **Avoiding:** Not addressing the existence of conflict.
- **Competing:** Being assertive and pursuing your own concerns, sometimes at expense of others.
- **Accommodating:** Letting go of your own ideas in order to satisfy others' interests above your own.
- **Compromising:** Middle ground between competing and accommodating, where you give up some of your ideas but not all of them.
- **Collaborating:** An approach in which people go beyond their own interests and solutions to create something new

Source: Kenneth W. Thomas and Ralph H. Kilmann (1974), *Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument*. Tuxedo, NY: Xicom Inc.

# Group Activity: Exploring Your Personal Conflict Styles



- Based on the definitions provided above, pick the one style that best describes how you respond to conflict in a team situation.
- Gather with others who have chosen your definition to discuss this style.
- In each group, choose someone to facilitate the discussion, someone to take notes, and someone who will report back to the large group.

# Group Discussion Topics



- Define the response style that you have selected.
- Give 3 – 4 examples of when you might use this style.
- Discuss the benefits of responding to conflict using this style.
- Discuss the challenges of responding to conflict using this style.



A stylized white figure with arms raised is positioned on the right side of the slide. The figure is set against a dark blue background that features three white stars of varying sizes in the upper right corner. A large, light green shape is visible in the top left corner. The figure's arms are raised, and its body is composed of simple, rounded shapes. The overall design is clean and modern.

# Approaches to Conflict

What is your style?

# Five Conflict Response Styles



- Avoiding
- Competing/Controlling
- Accommodating
- Compromising
- Collaborating

# Avoiding



- What is it?
  - Deciding that you don't want to take on a particular conflict.
  - Choosing not to engage in a particular conflict.
  - Not addressing the existence of a difficult issue or conflict.

# Avoiding



- Avoiding is best used when you are:
  - Withdrawing from a “hot” situation.
  - Deciding that this is not a high priority issue for you.
  - Waiting for a more appropriate time to deal with the conflict.
  - Concerned that a confrontation may be damaging to you or others.
  - Don’t feel you have the power or authority to address the issue.

# Avoiding



- **Personal and/or Professional Costs to Avoiding Conflict**
  - Important decisions may happen without your input.
  - You may have important information, input or perspectives that others don't have.
  - Underlying interests/issues that really are important to you may not get resolved.
  - Over time, your silence may make you feel like your opinions don't really matter.

# Competing



- What is it?
  - Standing up for your rights or beliefs
  - Being assertive.
  - Pursuing your own beliefs, values and concerns.
  - At times, asserting your opinion at the expense of others.

# Competing



- **Competing is Best Used When:**
  - The issue is vital to you, your family, or your organization, and you need to stand up for your values and beliefs.
  - It appears that someone needs to take charge of a challenging situation.
  - There is an emergency or question of safety and a quick decision needs to be made.
  - An unpopular course of action needs to be implemented (i.e., you need to enforce rules in a situation involving safety or discipline).

# Competing



- Personal and Professional Costs
  - This style generally sets up “win-lose” situations.
  - It’s difficult to promote democratic decision-making and/or creative problem-solving when a competing style is used often.
  - The sense of power gained by individuals using this style does not create an inclusive environment for others.
  - Frequent use of a competitive style can escalate anger and conflict.
  - If you use this style all of the time, people may develop a negative view of you.



# Accommodating



- What is it?
  - Letting go of your own ideas in a conflict, often for the purpose of satisfying someone else's interests above your own.
  - Being cooperative, conceding to the wishes of others.
  - The opposite of competing.
  - A quick way to resolve a conflict.
  - May involve selfless charity or generosity.

# Accommodating



- Accommodation Is Best Used When:
  - The issue is more important to the other person than to you.
  - You want to demonstrate that you are reasonable, and/or you realize that you are wrong.
  - You recognize that by ending the conflict through accommodation, you will not risk losing everything.
  - It's important to preserve harmony or avoid disruption.
  - You believe that the sense of cooperation you are building now will enhance relationships in a way that will be beneficial over time.

# Accommodating



## ■ Personal and Professional Costs

- If used too often, an accommodating style may deprive you of the influence, respect, and recognition you deserve.
- Your professional growth may be slowed if you don't give yourself the chance to offer your own ideas and perspectives.
- The person(s) to whom you make accommodations may get their desired results, but the underlying cause of conflict may remain unaddressed. Resentment can occur on the part of all involved.

# Compromising



- What is it?
  - Compromising is the middle ground between competing and accommodating, in which each of the people involved in a conflict gives up some things and not others.
  - Compromise can be thought of as “sharing the pie” or “splitting the difference.”
  - It requires both assertiveness (e.g., standing up for what is really important to you) and some level of cooperation (being willing to give up that which is less important to you).

# Compromising



- **Compromising is Best Used When:**
  - All or some of the issues being discussed are situation are moderately important to you.
  - The people involved realize that it is more important to solve the problem than to “win.”
  - There is a sense that it is possible to reach a “fair” or temporary settlement.
  - A quick middle-ground solution makes sense and brings at least partial satisfaction to all involved.

# Compromising



## ■ Personal and Professional Costs

- Compromises may cover up the “real issues” and lead to a future power struggle.
- Over-use of compromising may result in a climate of constant negotiation and/or “game playing.”
- The fact that “everybody wins” may make you feel like a group of individuals rather than a real team.
- You may experience a sense of personal cost if you “give in” on values and beliefs that are very important to you.

# Collaboration



- What is it?
  - An approach in which people go beyond their own interests and solutions to create something new.
  - Asserting your own self interests, while respecting and cooperating with the interests of others.
  - Meeting the interests of all parties to the maximum extent possible.
  - A win for everyone.
  - “One for all-all for one.”

# Collaboration



- Collaboration is Best Used When:
  - You want to find a solution that meets all needs and doesn't compromise anyone's critical beliefs, values, or outcomes.
  - You are using a team approach in which you are trying to equalize power, gain commitment, and merge insights.
  - You have time to work towards a true collaborative solution.
  - You have authority to implement the solution.



# Collaboration



## ■ Personal and Professional Costs

- Real collaboration may take a lot of time. It requires lots of investment in terms of time, energy and hard work.
- Problems that need to be solved very quickly or in the face of threats to safety may not be the best candidates for collaborative approaches.
- Collaboration cannot happen unless team members have a sense of trust and respect for one another, as well as a sense of shared participation and power.
- There is a need for all group members to check in with each other to make sure that true collaboration is occurring. All members need to feel heard and included. If not, this may lead to some people feeling that one or two people are resolving issues while others are accommodating or avoiding.

# Final Thoughts



- Each of us has our own style with which we are most comfortable or skillful.
- Most of us use more than one style to some degree.
- We sometimes mirror and are influenced by the conflict styles of others.
- The more we recognize which styles work best in particular situations, the better we become at responding to conflict.

# Case Study Activity



- Imagine that you are the leader of a four person parent advisory committee that has done a lot of research on ways to enhance activities available to students with disabilities and other students who are experiencing challenges in your school. After months of hard work, you have submitted a proposal to the school board for an inclusive after school program that your group feels will benefit all children. Yesterday, you got a call from the principal saying that the school board has chosen not to approve the proposal for budgetary reasons. You are about to hold a meeting to decide what to do next and have had a few preliminary calls that suggest that members of your committee have different opinions on the topic. One is really angry, because he believes that the principal and school board members care more about supporting sports teams than about supporting kids who struggle in school. He's ready to call the chair of the school board and the principal to let them know how he feels. Both of the other two members of your committee feel that the budget for the program was pretty high. One feels that your committee should start over and come up with a totally new plan that the Board will support, while the other thinks your committee should ask the board for ideas about how to scale back the current program so that it would be acceptable. You are not sure what solution is best, but you don't think the group would be well-served by being either too assertive or by giving up. As your meeting begins, you are wondering how to resolve the conflict that is likely to take place during your meeting...

# Case Study: Questions for Discussion



- What are the primary conflicts that you see in this situation?
- Based on the information you have, what are the conflict response styles of the members of the committee?
- What is likely to happen if group members rely only on their preferred conflict styles during the meeting? Think about 1) what might happen within the group, and 2) what might happen to the group in relation to the school board's decision.
- What other options does this group have, and what conflict response style(s) might be most helpful in this situation?
- What might you, as the facilitator of the group, do to support the group in working towards solutions to 1) inner group conflicts, and 2) the challenge you face in dealing with the school board?