

## Conflict Management Strategies – Implications for Health Professions Education

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### ABSTRACT

Conflict management is an issue of perpetual interest to individuals as well as the organization. Conflicts are inevitable in hospitals and health care organizations. If resolved tactfully and in time, conflicts have a potentiality to bring creative ways of solving problems. However, long unaddressed conflicts can demoralize individuals and weaken organization's capacity to deliver goods. Management Gurus have identified five styles of conflict resolution used by the individuals, viz., avoiding, competing, accommodating, compromising and collaborating. The ancient Indian wisdom gained from Kautilya Arthashastra describes four strategies, viz., Sama, Dana, Bheda and Danda to deal with conflicts. There is no single best approach as each one has its own strengths and limitations. The purpose of this article is to describe these models by taking specific situations and derive educational implications for the individuals and organizations.

### Key-words:

Conflict management, health professions education, salutogenesis.

### INTRODUCTION

Conflicts are a part and parcel of modern living. They are a harsh reality of any organization with serious implications on personal well being of the staff as well as productivity of the organization. The good news is that conflicts are also helpful. Conflicts are likely to stimulate a healthy competition, and result in innovative ways of solving problems. Hence they enhance productivity. History has shown that great leaders like Gandhi, Mandela, Dalali Lama and Churchill confronted with mighty empires against injustice and won the battle. On the other hand, if the conflicts are not addressed properly, and in time, they may lead to chronic problems and jeopardize the peace of individuals and productivity of an organization.

Applying to health profession, conflicts are even more likely to happen frequently. According to an estimate made by Mediation Training Institute

International, 65% performance problems are due to strained relation among employees and not due to deficits in skill or motivation.<sup>1</sup>

Effective health delivery depends upon concerted work by a health team which consists of several cadres of staff, doctors, nurses, and allied health personnel. The larger the organization, the higher is the interdependency. This results in communication problems leading to conflicts among staff. Even when the rules of the game are well defined, the staff members because of their diverse backgrounds, skill sets and attitudes, enter in to conflict situations which can impair the quality of care. Conflicts are also common in dealing with the patients especially when the expectations are high and the capacity is limited. Conflicts are not uncommon in educational settings, between the senior and the junior faculty or between student and teacher in matters of discipline or assessment. It is therefore

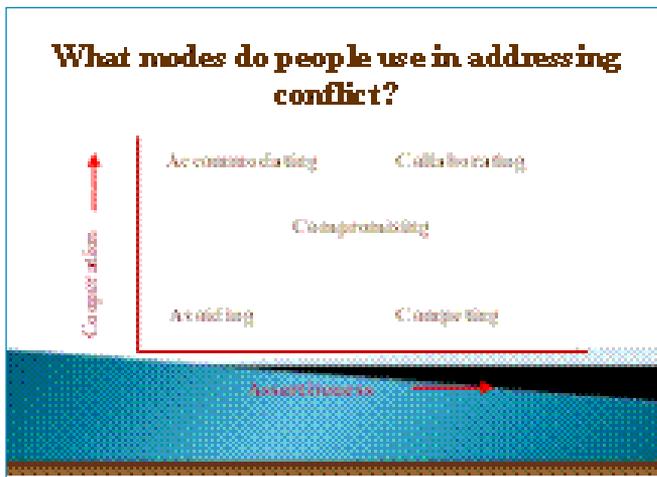
of vital importance to learn and practice the skills of conflict management at all levels.

Management Gurus in the West have developed theories and practices of effective conflict management.<sup>2</sup> They have developed tools which have shown proven benefits in understanding one's style of managing conflicts in a given situation. Indian wisdom gained from the texts of Kautilya Arthashastra has also vividly described strategies for resolving conflicts in governance, politics and warfare.<sup>3</sup> In this article, we will explain the various styles of conflict resolution discussed in the Western literature and the ancient Indian scripts.

### THE THOMAS-KILMANN CONFLICT MODE INSTRUMENT (TKI)

Thomas and Kilmann hypothesized that depending upon the extent to which the people are assertive and cooperative, they use five modes or styles of handling conflicts – avoiding, competing, accommodating, compromising and collaborating.<sup>4</sup> Assertiveness refers to the extent to which one tries to satisfy one's own concerns. Cooperativeness refers to the extent to which one tries to satisfy the concerns of others. Figure 1 depicts how different combinations of assertion and cooperation result in five styles of resolving conflict.

**Figure 1:** Five styles of conflict resolution used by individuals



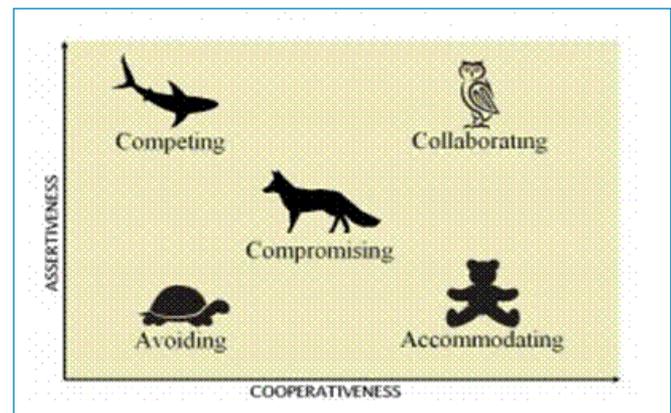
For example, a person who is neither assertive, nor cooperative tends to avoid conflict in a given situation. With high assertion and low cooperation one tends to adopt competing style. With liberal cooperation and less assertion one tends to follow 'accommodating'. With high cooperation and high assertion one tends to follow collaboration. With moderate cooperation and assertion one tends to be 'compromising'.

The inventory prepared by Thomas & Kilmann called as Thomas Kilmann Inventory (TKI) contains 30 self-administered questions (or statements) to be answered by a subject. By following the scoring key, one can easily judge one's predominant style of resolving conflict. TKI has been used successfully in the U.S., for more than 30 years to help individuals in assessing their styles in resolving conflicts. Based on the newly updated norm sample, it has been shown that TKI may be used with confidence to successfully aid conflict management in organizational and educational settings among people from diverse groups.<sup>4,5</sup>

### FIVE STYLES OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Each of the five modes of conflict resolution is associated with a symbol of animal that mimics these styles in a particular manner: Avoiding – Turtle, Competing – Shark, Accommodating – Teddy Bear, Compromising – Fox and Collaborating – Owl (Figure 2). It has been shown that no single style can be judged as superior 'per se' over the other. The successful application depends upon the nature of the conflict situation and how a person uses it effectively, rather than inherent effectiveness of these modes.

**Figure 2:** Five styles of Conflict Management



While right application of a particular style leads to a win, the wrong application may lead to failure and frustration. We will discuss each of the styles with some examples based on common scenarios found in health care settings.

### COMPETING (SHARK)

Competing mode is symbolized by Shark. The shark attacks and finishes the poor opponent in no time, thus ending the conflict. In any organization you will see people who compete and rise in the hierarchy. Many

of the kings and conquerors in the human history, who were ambitious and powerful, used nothing but competing style for enlarging their kingdom.

Competing is recommended only when you are in a powerful position, or when you need to take a call in case of emergency situation. If you are occupying a lower position, competing can be tried provided you know that you are right. This is called courage of conviction. A side effect of competing is that your relationship with your colleague may strain after the competition. You may win the argument but lose a friend. This can also affect your own mental well being. Hence you need to be careful in opting for competing.

### **Example of a competing winner**

One of the common areas of disagreement noticed among anaesthetists in a growing hospital is the use of elective intubation. The seniors trained in the good olden days have bias against the use of elective intubations. A junior anaesthetist trained recently competes with a senior doctor who doesn't believe in elective intubation. However, the junior takes up this challenge and proves with evidence based practice that elective intubations can salvage the patients also reduce the length of stay in the ICU. The senior has no option in this case but to agree and fall in line with this practice. The junior doctor competes here but wins the game.

### **Example of a Competing loser**

A Senior Manager firmly believes in his policy, which assumes that individual capability and motivation are more important than following SOPs for achieving standard performance in a hospital. He has high contacts. He boasts of his policy saying that his policy worked for ages. Incidentally, he enters in to conflict with a newly appointed manager (female) who doesn't agree with him. She proves her worth by setting up policies like SOPs which are not 'person dependent' but based on set standards. This measure leads to rapid improvement in the processes of the hospital. Tired and frustrated of his own incompetency, the Senior Manager resigns and leaves. His resignation is universally welcome!

## **AVOIDING (TURTLE)**

Avoiding is represented by turtle, which is slow, inactive animal. A turtle goes in to hibernation to tide over the

crisis. Avoiding is a kind of 'escapism', resorting to flight instead of fight. Avoiding has some advantage when you are in a lower position, lack confidence or don't know how to deal with the situation. By avoiding you can buy some time and fight back later when you develop confidence. Avoiding conflict is not a good option because, it holds the issues in abeyance and causes unrest among both the parties in conflict. At the most it can be used as a temporarily solution to a conflicting situation.

### **Example of an Avoiding winner**

A Manager is in the habit of doing micro-management. He insists on his assistant to put up all kind of files so that he can issue memo to create a fear psychosis among staff. This creates a lot of unrest amongst staff. The second in command doesn't like this style. Moreover, he is also affected by the slow progress in expediting huge number of files that pile up. Being fed up with the boss's tyranny, the second in command now decides to 'filter the cases' and return many files which are neither urgent nor important. Interestingly, many of the issues were sorted out, on their own and his performance doubled.

### **Example of an Avoiding loser**

A doctor working in the Dept of TB and Chest Diseases (TBCD) in a Government hospital notices that doctors belonging to other speciality such as General Medicine prescribe unnecessary tests such as blood culture, for Military TB patients. However the doctor doesn't bring this to the notice of the Chief of General Medicine Unit, just to avoid conflict. The cost of treatment shoots up and the reputation of the hospital goes down. Ultimately, the blame game starts between Dept of TBCD and other specialties, which is exposed by the press media. Avoiding the conflict in this case leads to further worsening of the situation.

## **ACCOMMODATING (TEDDY BEAR)**

Accommodating is represented by Teddy Bear, which is a symbol of peace and modesty. Every organization contains people who are ready to give up competition for sake of peace and harmony. At times they are labeled as timid or 'yes men', which may not be true. The spirit of giving, agreeing, adjusting and accommodating is perhaps most noble cause of success in an organization. Hence it is said "Give and forgive, get and forget". The only problem in giving is that your sacrifice is sometimes 'taken for granted' especially by the selfish

souls. They may exploit your weakness, and try to take credit for your hard work. One can use accommodation selectively for a public good rather than for benefitting a person individually.

### **Example of winning and losing accommodator**

Whether to go for aggressive treatment in a private hospital set up or to go for conservative treatment is a matter of constant debate amongst doctors. Dr Thiruselvam, a Registered Medical Officer RMO is a classic example of accommodating person. Like chanting Thirukkural (text written by famous Tamil saint Thiruvallavar), he preaches doctors, nurses, and technicians how to manage patients conservatively without doing any high end investigations. His conservative approach has succeeded in alleviating many expensive treatments and complications. However, when many would disagree with him, he responds to them softly by saying “OK, times have changed and so are treatment options, please go ahead with whatever you think right”. This response helps him to stay on the ground yet accommodating the views of others. Coming to the losing side of accommodating style, Dr Thiruselvam is perceived as a low profile, ‘redundant’ employee of not having achieved many measurable achievements.

### **COMPROMISING (FOX)**

Compromising is represented by fox, which is supposed to be shrewd or cunning animal. Compromising generally happens when two persons are equally powerful and desperate to win the game. The only way out is to arrive at a compromise formula (50:50 formula), in which each gets due share. Again, compromise is a good strategy to find a temporary solution and not an ideal solution. In most cases of competition between equal rivals, a negotiation takes place and they mutually agree to share the benefits. Often compromise formula is mediated by a third person who is respected and neutral.

### **Compromising Winner**

Many of the strikes taking place in a hospital setting are because of ‘tug of war’ between two strong forces, viz., the administrators and the employee unions. When there is a stale-mate (point of no return), the top management intervenes. There will be some kind of negotiation taking place between both the parties. Both agree to give up something and take away some

thing. A compromise formula leading to a ‘win win situation’ is the most desirable thing to happen.

### **Compromising Loser**

When the compromise formula is in favour of a certain cadre of employees, it demoralises the other party and comes down heavily on the organizational effectiveness. For instance, if there is a conflict between nurses and attenders, taking a particular side simply because of their strength or public perception may be detrimental to the organization as the aggrieved party is likely to be demoralized. The fairness on part of the deciding authority assumes great importance.

### **COLLABORATING (OWL)**

Collaborating mode is represented by owl, which is known to sleep during day time and remain active during night. Collaboration is the best mode of resolving conflict which involves a comprehensive strategy of building a team, with high level of trust among all members. Collaboration is especially suitable when the person has time, resources and energy to address the potential obstacles. It will be logical to think of collaborating style while building a new organization with a focus on its mission and vision.

A person with a collaborating style is essentially the one who has a long term vision, works underground, and builds a team which produces high performance. Such a team has a high level of trust. However, no one can build such a team overnight. One has to invest a lot of time and effort to build such a team which works with full devotion and free from conflicts.

### **Collaborating Winner**

Citing the personal experience of co-author of this article, the main reason for her smooth transition to a new workplace, a large reputed hospital, has been largely due to collaborative style of management in the capacity of DMS. When a new “outsider” not even familiar with the vernacular medium, hailing from a Metro City joined as DMS, there were speculations that she would run away in no time. The first task she undertook was to establish the Code Blue Services within the Hospital. In a short span of three years, the CPR team was established. Now it receives 50-60 calls per month and manages to save 60% of patients. The team was formed by involving interdisciplinary faculty drawn from medicine, anaesthesia, surgery, and nursing cadres mainly by using the collaborative skills.

## Collaborating loser

There is not even a single story of failure in collaborative efforts. Yes, challenges are obvious, in the form of motivating the people, overcoming resistance to change, winning their confidence as collaborators and partners of progress.

## LEARNING FROM ANCIENT INDIAN WISDOM

Ancient Indian knowledge about conflict management comes in the form of “*Upayas*” which mean “approaches” to deal with a situation. Kautilya, a renowned diplomat of ancient India during Maurya dynasty wrote famous book ‘*Artha shastra*’ which refers mainly to economics, but contains references to politics, governance, and resolving conflicts in peace and warfare. Kautilya’s prescription covers four strategies or *Upayas*: *Sama*, *Dana*, *Bheda* and *Danda* to deal with the conflicts.

*Sama* the first step refers to reconciliation or alliances. In any conflicting situation it is better to talk to the opponent, clarify the stand, discuss the arguments on both sides so as to come to a solution. A lot of communication and counselling skills are needed here to deal with the aggrieved party. *Sama* is akin to the collaborating mode. The only difference is that collaborating is pro-active while *sama* is initiated once the conflict arises.

*Dana*, (also referred to as *Dam*) the second strategy refers to gifts and compensation given by a person to the opponent to sort out the conflict. The gift may be material, financial or even kind gesture in the form of hosting a party in the honour of aggrieved person to pacify the anger. We have heard of many wars having prevented by establishing matrimonial alliance with the opponent. *Dana* is akin to the accommodating mode when some kind of sacrifice is done by one person to bring peace and harmony in a conflicting situation.

*Bheda*, described by Kautilya is a ‘divide and rule’ technique. If ‘A’ is in conflict with ‘B’, ‘A’ will align with ‘C’ and alienates ‘B’ to bring pressure on ‘B’ who eventually gives up and surrenders to ‘A’. According to some people, *Bheda* is supposed to be more powerful than even *Danda*, the exercise of force. It works as ‘lobbying’ in the modern context.

*Danda* or the use of force is supposed to be the last option to be exercised by a person to resolve the conflict. When all other options are exhausted, one

has no choice but to use force. *Danda* is nothing but competing mode of TKI.

Interestingly the TKI inventories in the U.S. context have shown competing at the first choice and collaborating as the last choice. In contrast, Kautilya’s formula progresses gradually from *Sama*, and then to moves on to *Dana*, *Bheda* and *Danda* as last option. This appears to be deep rooted in the human values evolved from cultural heritage of India which emphasizes *Dharma*, or right conduct as the corner stone of all human endeavours. Closely associated with *Dharma* are other values, such as Truth (*Satya*), Peace (*Shanti*), Love (*Prema*) and Non-violence (*Ahimsa*) which are intertwined.

Applying the four styles to resolve conflicts in health care scenario, the onus of resolving conflict lies with the Government in ensuring good governance, that can follow the dictum of *sama*, *dana*, *bheda* and *danda*. The good governance starts with *Sama*, talking to the people prone to conflicts. This also means ‘setting clear expectations’ related to the mission and vision of the organization, making rules of the game clear and transparent. It involves talking to concerned people, explaining the pro’s and con’s of their conflicts and how it could impact their families and the organization. When *sama* doesn’t work, the government should resort to *dana*, in the form of liberal welfare schemes aimed at the real benefit to the people, and not as a means of inducement for winning the battle of elections. If *dana* also doesn’t work out, measures should be adopted for *bedha*, which involves giving differential treatment to different parties that are in conflict. For instance, those who respect rules should be recognized and rewarded. Those who flout the rules should be excluded from any kind of support. If this also doesn’t help the last resort is *danda*. The culprit should be brought to books by severe punishment. What is really ailing our system is lack of recognition to those who deserve and lack of punitive action against those who are incompetent and corrupt.

Combining the strategies learnt from the theories of management and the wisdom gained over thousands of years we can learn some useful lessons and tips for conflict management.

## WHAT CAN BE DONE AT THE INDIVIDUAL LEVEL?

We have outlined some tips for the individuals to prevent conflict and promote a harmony at home and workplace, both of which are complementary to each

other. The rate race for acquisition of material wealth through competing methods is no longer an effective method. Collaboration is a sure success mode for a long term win resulting in public good. In the present times, a child is taught to compete with others and collaborate with himself or herself. This should be reversed. A child should be made to compete with himself / herself and collaborate with others, so that organizations and workplaces will nurture happiness instead of hate.

The biggest hurdle to be crossed is to conquer ones' ego. While ego is the biggest motivator to rise in career, it is a major hurdle for growing and learning new skills. There is no magic formula to conquer ego. However, being aware of the ego is the first step. Being open to honest feedback and even criticism from others at times, would be helpful in applying self-correction. The practice of self-reflection and introspection can make a major difference in mending one's ego. Sharing credit with others and taking responsibility for failure is the golden rule for winning people in the long run.

While domestic problems are likely to cause stress, the workplace related conflicts add fuel to the fire. Achieving a 'work – life balance' holds the key for preventing conflicts. Life style modifications and engagement in spiritual activities can be helpful in maintaining a 'work-life balance'. Techniques such as Yoga, music listening, meditation, prayer, practice of silence, can help in combating work pressure. The concept of 'salutogenesis', with a focus on well-being as against 'pathogenesis' (disease control or cure) has drawn much interest in recent times, pointing to the role of mind-body medicine<sup>6</sup> (Table 1).

**Table 1: Tips for the individuals to manage conflicts**

1	Be aware of the various styles of conflict resolution
2	It is always good to talk to your opponent and ask why he/she is in conflict with you. Address the root cause, before reacting or making a judgment about your opponent.
3	Know well your strengths and limitations. Assess your opponent and the situation before deciding your style.
4	Try to see the positive side of your opponent. Accept the differences. Agree to disagree. Appreciate his/her qualities.
5	Resort to a healthy life style with healthy diet, exercise, relaxation, cultivation of hobbies, pre-occupation with self-less service or community work. Maintaining a work-life balance holds the key.

## WHAT CAN BE DONE AT THE ORGANIZATIONAL LEVEL?

There is no second opinion that organizations should play a pro-active role in preventing conflicts by framing sound policies that foster collaboration rather than competition. The communication channels should be opened at all levels, thus avoiding miss-communication and misunderstanding which are the root causes of conflict (Table 2).

**Table 2: Tips for the Organizations**

1	Promote good governance by making clear the expectations, rewarding and reinforcing the collaborative work rather than individual contributions.
2	Induction and training of all employees in soft-skill development including conflict management
3	Leadership by example, role modelling, reinforcing super-ordinate goals of the organization
4	Encouraging a culture of constructive feedback through portfolio approach
5	Formation of special interest groups vested with tasks to earn goodwill of the patients, and the society

Effective leadership and good governance go a long way in preventing conflicts. The effective leaders can create a shared vision and mission, develop teams and empower them to collaborate with each other in achieving collective good. Whenever a conflict arises, the top management should appeal to the super-ordinate goal of the organization, keeping aside the individual interests.

Every employee should be subjected to a short training program on soft skill development including life-skills, communication skills, leadership, and conflict management, at the time of recruitment. A baseline data should be collected and made a part of his/her portfolio. This portfolio should be followed at regular intervals to form a part of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) linked with career enhancement.

Some of the feasible measures which can be taken by the health care organizations are credit sharing with all employees, motivating them to engage in socially useful projects such as welfare of destitute, empowerment of girls, physically/mentally challenged and the aged population besides preservation and

protection of our environment which help in building collective goodwill among the employees with the community. To begin with the organizations may be encouraged to form small Special Interest Groups engaged in a particular activity that may earn good will of the people. For example a treating team (multi-disciplinary) may take up activity of greeting every patient before and after hospital treatment. Allied health services units may take upon the task of spreading public health education among the hospital visitors at a nominal cost.

## TRAINING IN CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

Conflict management should be a part of the undergraduate training as a part of foundation course or modules on Attitude, Ethics and Communication (AETCOM) which have been introduced by the MCI in recent years.<sup>7</sup> While didactic teaching will have little value in bringing change in the attitude, approaches like case scenarios, video, role play, simulations and practical experience in the workplaces can be more valuable strategies for training students in conflict management.

While undergraduate training helps in laying down a foundation for soft skill developments, it is necessary to see that the training continues to Postgraduate level and becomes a part of assessment. The training must be extended to workplace setting in the form of Continuing Professional Development, which is a key factor for growth of every staff. The training initiatives should be led by the Faculty Development Program (FDP) and often in concert with hospital based training initiatives.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, conflicts are inevitable. What is important is to be aware of this fact and devising ways and means of tackling them, preventing them at an early stage and promoting a culture of love, peace and harmony for moving towards excellence which is the ultimate goal of individuals and organizations. We need to look at the positive side of everyone and every event, striking a right work-life balance.

## CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

None

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## Aspirin prophylaxis: Two new studies push the pendulum away

In the first trial (ARRIVE; *NEJM JW Gen Med* Oct 1 2018 and *Lancet* 2018 Aug 26; [e-pub]), about 12,000 nondiabetic patients were randomized to 100 mg of aspirin or placebo daily. Enrolled men were 55 or older and had  $\geq 2$  CV risk factors; enrolled women were 60 or older and had  $\geq 3$  CV risk factors. During average follow-up of 5 years, aspirin conferred no CV benefit: The incidence of a composite endpoint that included myocardial infarction (MI) and stroke was about 4% in both groups. Gastrointestinal bleeding was slightly, but statistically significantly, more common with aspirin (1% vs. 0.5%;  $P=0.0007$ ).

In the second trial (ASCEND; *NEJM JW Gen Med* Oct 1 2018 and *N Engl J Med* 2018 Aug 26; [e-pub]), 15,000 middle-aged or older diabetic patients were randomized to daily aspirin (100 mg) or placebo. During average follow-up of  $\approx 7$  years, the incidence of serious vascular events was 1 percentage point lower in the aspirin group than in the placebo group (8.5% vs. 9.6%;  $P=0.01$ ), but the incidence of major bleeding events was 1 percentage point higher with aspirin (4.1% vs. 3.2%;  $P=0.003$ ).

In sum, among nondiabetic patients with CV risk factors, aspirin conferred no benefit and was associated with slight harm. Among diabetic patients, the tradeoff between small probabilities of benefit and harm was a close call.