

5 Ways People Manage Conflict

Relationships break down for a variety of reasons, but some feuds and fights could easily be prevented if, during the initial stages of conflict, disagreements were handled wisely. Relationships are more likely preserved when people on both sides recognize the different ways that people go about managing and resolving conflict.

In [Cross-Cultural Conflict: Building Relationships for Effective Ministry](#)

, Duane Elmer draws on the work of R. H. Thomas and K. W. Kilmann to summarize five ways those of us in the West handle conflict:

1. The Win-Lose Strategy

“Win-lose people assume that everything should be seen as right or wrong,” Elmer writes (34). For this reason, they see things in black and white and resist any notion of “gray.” Negotiation is a form of compromise. When differences of opinion arise, the win-lose person assumes that the one who disagrees is the one who is wrong.

Flexibility is a sign of weakness. Energy should be expended not in trying to find common ground, but in trying to convince the other person of the wrongness of their viewpoint. Elmer lists a variety of tactics used to convince others to change their minds: physical force, threats, intimidation, silence, verbiage and volume, pointing out past failures, pulling rank, rewarding or spiritual one-upmanship (35).

It is not surprising that a win-lose person is willing to sacrifice relationships in order to get their way and remain “right.” The way to **confront a win-lose person is to avoid an argument and instead rely on a group to show the person where they are wrong** and why it is important for them to resist being dogmatic or stubborn in areas of preference, not principle.

There are, of course, certain areas we should be dogmatically unchanging in (certain doctrinal commitments or moral standards). But to allow convictions on personal matters become all-encompassing, to the point where relationships break down due to unbending dogmatism, is to go beyond Scripture and fail to take into consideration the possible flaws in one’s own thinking. Elmer recommends we “be dogmatic and stubborn where God is, and flexible where He is” (36). This is good advice, but **win-lose people too often assume that their position and God’s are the same!**

2. Avoidance

On the opposite spectrum of the win-lose person, those who avoid disagreement assume that differences are always bad because they might lead to relational breakdown. Confrontational conflict may cause a rupture in the relationship; therefore, we ought to minimize the opportunities for confrontation and hope that the disagreements will resolve themselves.

There may be times when avoidance of conflict is the best approach. After all, we should not crave confrontation in our relationships. **Wisdom may dictate a season of silence**, in which heated emotions have time to cool off so that reason can prevail.

But those who tend to avoid conflict usually wind up with weak and superficial relationships that are unable to stand up under the strain of differing opinions. Important decisions are postponed. Issues bubbling up under the surface are never addressed, and as a result, relationships remain surface level. **Avoiding conflict at all costs is often a sign of weakness and insecurity.**

3. Giving In

Another approach to managing conflict is to give in to the stronger person. In order to accommodate another point of view or smooth over the differences, this person yields to others and maintains peace.

Like those who avoid conflict, relationships are seen as more important than “being right.” But unlike the “avoiders,” those who give in are more likely to yield so that the relationship can still be robust and disagreement be minimized.

Elmer calls this person a “people-pleaser.” They tend to **minimize their difference of opinion to the point their own personal goals and values are forfeited**. Occasionally, the one who gives in will be pushed to the limit and will adopt a win-lose posture on other issues. But for the most part, they are likely to give up their own viewpoint in order to keep the peace.

There are times when giving in is the wisest option. Elmer points out certain times when giving in is the preferred choice. For example, when the issue is of little consequence and the relationship is obviously more important than the disagreement, it is wise to admit you may be wrong.

Another example would be to give in at one point in order to win at a different point. Every relationship has a built-in amount of give-and-take.

Or perhaps you might give in so that others may have room to make their own mistakes, face the consequences, and grow as a result. **The difficulty is in knowing when to give in and when to stand firm.**

4. Compromise

For the win-lose person, compromise is the same as capitulation and should always be avoided. But there are many people who choose to view conflict from a “realistic” perspective in which it is already assumed that no one will get everything they want all the time. Because it is impossible for everyone to have everything, they believe all people should be willing to give a little in order to get a little. “Life is the art of negotiating to some happy middle ground,” Elmer writes (41).

Compromise is the best approach when both sides are pushing to extremes, asking for

more than they want, so that in the end all are expected to meet in the middle and still walk away with most of their desires met. In theory, everyone should be happy with the end result.

But, as Elmer points out, this method means both parties must be willing to give up something important to them (42). The risk is that the “happy middle ground” will make both sides unsatisfied and unhappy. **Compromise is also problematic if one of the negotiating parties has disproportionate power.** At this point, it is likely that the powerful party will get more of its demands and the other party will walk away dissatisfied with the results.

5. Carefronting

According to Elmer, “**carefronting means directly approaching the other person in a caring way so that achieving a win-win solution is most likely**” (42). In order to accomplish this task, the two parties must agree to come together, commit to preserve the relationship, creatively find a solution that satisfies both sides, utilize reason over emotion, separate the person from the issue, and strive for a solution that will bring peace.

Many assume that carefronting is the biblical approach to resolving conflict. Indeed, there are similarities with Jesus’ instructions in [Matthew 18:15-17](#) for confronting a wayward brother or sister in Christ.

But Elmer cautions us against thinking that carefronting is the only model of conflict resolution. Certain cultural tendencies may make this model more applicable in some settings as opposed to others.

What About You?

Which of these approaches do you tend toward? ***How have you resolved conflicts with people who manage conflict differently than you do?***

Read more from Trevin [here](#).