
HOW DID THAT HAPPEN?

OUR AUTOMATIC CONFLICT STYLES

Have you ever wondered why, despite so many best intentions, we still fly off the handle over something trivial? Or perhaps when some well-intentioned soul tries to engage you on an important matter you just keep changing the subject? Why does this happen, and what can we do about it?

It was one outburst too many. Derek had been given several warnings about losing his temper at work; each time he had promised to change, and he'd meant it. But somehow he just couldn't follow up on his resolution. Somebody would say something, or ask a question in a way that Derek didn't like and... BOOM!

Most of us can think of examples in our lives where we had reacted in a way we didn't intend. Like Derek we've overreacted and become confrontational or, in the face of something we see as an unreasonable demand, instead of discussing it and asserting our position, we have avoided the risk of confrontation by agreeing with the other person, when inside that isn't what we'd wanted.

For example, we can all recognise an unthinking reaction where, in response to a comment, we feel attacked and immediately launch a counter-attack. Somebody speaks to me sharply, and I snap back at them. Or I go to ask my boss for a raise. I intend to be assertive, but before I can control myself, the first words out of my mouth are excuses or apologies as I try to placate him.

Derek wound up with a disciplinary, and was ordered to get anger management training if he wanted to keep his job. For most of us it is not usually so extreme, but we've all had moments when we have acted in a way that we hadn't intended. We've come away from a meeting feeling dissatisfied that we didn't put our ideas across, or we accidentally let the Derek inside us do the talking (or shouting), and we've had to eat humble pie to make amends. How often have we promised ourselves that 'next time will be different', only to find that next time is just more of the same?

This is the stuff of failed resolutions, the double-whammy, where we identify something undesirable in our behaviour, and then find we are powerless to change it. What is going on?

AUTOMATIC RESPONSES. HAS OUR AUTOPILOT LET US DOWN?

We all like to think of ourselves as individuals. We don't like to think that we respond blindly or automatically to events; this challenges our image of ourselves as rational beings. We believe that when we get into a difficult situation where conflict threatens we choose how to respond, and that this response will be chosen to suit the particular context.

But people, like other mammals, have a limited set of responses to conflict. When faced with a perceived threat we will all tend to react in one of a few ways that are instinctive. 'Perceived threat' means that it is sufficient for us to feel under threat to trigger an automatic response, and the threat can be to a person's self-esteem or sense of wellbeing, just as much as a real, physical threat.

A limited set of reactions is part of our universal survival response; our evolution has favoured behaviours that keep us safe; attack or submission for example. But though these patterns of behaviour are intended to protect us, they can often provoke retaliation by the other person, so escalating the behaviour that triggered the defence in the first place. Or, like my example of asking for a raise, our avoidance leads to resentment and bad feeling because the strategy doesn't address the central question that needs to be dealt with.

The common patterns of behaviour I am referring to are triggered automatically as a defence when we feel threatened. We may consciously register this threat, but it is just as likely that we feel the threat but don't want to acknowledge it, or we experience it at an unconscious level. Either way, the behaviour that it provokes in us is likely to be habitual, reactive and not always best suited to the circumstances.

Writers from psychology and other social sciences are agreed on this limited range of responses, though they use different terms to describe the behaviours. We all have access to all of these styles, but generally we default to one or two of them. And that is a problem, because not all threats require the same type of response.

REACTIVE AND INFLAMMATORY

Our patterns of response to conflict, real or perceived, tend to be like this; habitual, reactionary and unthinking. Sometimes this is just what is needed - in cases of real threat for example - but often it is not and it will be at best ineffective and at worst inflammatory. They usually do nothing to address the underlying tensions, but instead respond superficially to what is said or our perception of the meaning.

It is useful, say the experts, to be able to use the full range of responses, in order to be able to choose the most appropriate one for a given set of circumstances. This starts with knowing our own preferred style of response; increased self-awareness helps us to identify our patterns of response so that we can develop the styles that come less naturally to us,. This gives us more options and greater flexibility when conflict threatens.

I'll use two different models to illustrate this. The Thomas-Kilmann Conflict-Mode Instrument (Box 1), is widely used for assessing a person's behaviour in conflict situations. 'Conflict situations' are those in which the concerns of two people appear to be incompatible. Remembering that perceptions play such a large part in our responses and reactions this incompatibility may be perceived, rather than actual. The authors say:

"Each of us is capable of using all five conflict-handling modes. None of us can be characterised as having a single style of dealing with conflict. But certain people use some modes better than others and, therefore, tend to rely on those modes more heavily than others—whether because of temperament or practice."

Another model that illustrates this is Virginia Satir's 'Characters' (Box 2). Satir noticed that people have access to five universal patterns of communication when they are reacting to the stress and at the same time felt that their self-esteem was at risk. She says we prefer four of these styles – thus they are reactions rather than chosen responses – and this leads to sending out 'double messages'. If I feel I am about to be attacked and respond defensively then the person I am speaking to will hear my defensiveness; neither of us will get the chance to discuss underlying concerns as we each respond to the communication pattern of the other, rather than exploring intent or meaning. The fifth style, which Satir calls Levelling, is the one she recommends for reducing the risk of misunderstanding and improving communications.

Satir's model says that these four stances underlie most human negotiations when there is any sort of tension or pressure. Though each of these behaviours is entirely appropriate in some situations, says Satir, none is appropriate to all contexts. Since people generally seem to default to one or two of them, these styles can let us down if we are reacting unthinkingly to a perceived threat, rather than choosing a response where we express ourselves honestly and which meets the needs of the situation.

BECOMING MORE EFFECTIVE

If we are to be effective in our lives, and above all when dealing with tension and conflict, we must develop and maintain relationships that are healthy and function well, with communications that are open and effective. To do this we need to understand our own reactions to stress or threat, and know how we typically react under pressure. Once we have identified these default modes, we can consider where they are appropriate and where they are not, and begin to increase our repertoire by developing and using the other styles. There are a number of on-line resources for doing this, for example the Kraybill Conflict Style Inventory, and the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict-Mode Instrument (see refs).

CONCLUSION

I have chosen the approaches by writers have been hugely influential in their fields; Thomas and Kilmann in Social Psychology/Conflict Resolution and Satir in Family therapy and communications.

Both say that people have a limited number of styles of responding to threat or conflict, but that typically we use only some of these and so have a preferred conflict style. They acknowledge that different styles are most useful in different situations, and recommend that we learn about our own preferred styles, and then work to expand our repertoire. Flexibility of response, they say, will enable us to react to conflict in a more open and honest way, and furthermore, in a way that is fitting to the situation and our needs at the time.

Critics might say that we are far too complex and our relationships too multi-faceted, to be forced into a few typical patterns of response. Personally I do not think that this is the case, but if it were, they still provide useful models for thinking about how we approach situations we find tricky or threatening. The recommendation is 'know thyself'; becoming aware of our own automatic responses can prevent us from acting like Derek, and enable us to choose the most effective response for a given situation.

THE THOMAS - KILMANN INVENTORY

This assesses a person's behaviour in conflict along two dimensions: 1) assertiveness; the extent to which the person attempts to satisfy his own concerns, and 2) cooperativeness; the extent to which the person attempts to satisfy the other person's concerns. These two basic dimensions of behaviour define five different modes for responding to conflict situations:

COMPETING

The Competing style is highly assertive and uncooperative, with minimal cooperation, aimed at winning. It chooses action over reflection. It is the default mode for many people; when faced with threat they contend or challenge, which can be construed as fighting back. To use this style successfully it must be tempered with reason; recognised as a strategy and used consciously, rather than responding this way out of fear, insecurity or uncertainty.

Used constructively this style will appear assertive, rather than aggressive. One must be prepared to argue and debate, assert opinions and feelings, and learn to state your one's position.

AVOIDING

Avoiding is low on assertiveness and cooperation. With this style nobody's concerns are addressed. It is low on assertiveness and on cooperativeness; the goal is to delay. It is appropriate to use this style with issues of low importance, to reduce tensions, or to buy time. It is also useful when you have little control over the situation, need to allow others to deal with the conflict, or when the problem is part of a bigger issue that needs to be dealt with separately. Using this style means developing foresight in knowing when to withdraw and practice leaving things unresolved.

COMPROMISING

This style means forgoing some of your concerns and committing to those of the other. This is moderately assertive and moderately cooperative; the goal is to find middle ground and an answer that is fair to both sides. The compromising style is used with issues of moderate importance, when both parties are equally powerful committed to opposing views. This produces temporary solutions and is appropriate when time is a concern, or where there is an impasse. Compromising requires good communication

to keep the dialogue open, valuing all points of view, and a willingness to concede part of what you want.

ACCOMMODATING

Foregoing concerns in order to satisfy the concerns of others means Accommodating. The goal is to yield, which is low assertiveness and high cooperativeness. This style is appropriate in situations when you want to appear reasonable, develop performance, create good will, keep the peace, or for issues of low importance. Accommodating skills include the ability to sacrifice, the ability to be selfless, the ability to obey orders, and to yield. This style is the opposite of competing. There is an element of self-sacrifice in this mode as the individual works to satisfy the concerns of the other person.

COLLABORATING

The Collaborating Style is used when the concern is to satisfy both sides. It is highly assertive and highly cooperative; the goal is to find a “win/win” solution. Collaborating means improving relationships, developing solutions, understanding and sharing perspectives, and getting commitment. Using this style can support open discussion, task proficiency, brainstorming, distribution of work among team members, and development of creative problem solving. This style is appropriate to use regularly in a team environment. Collaborating skills include the ability to use active or effective listening, to approach situations in a non-threatening way, to analyse suggestions, and identify underlying concerns.

THE SATIR CATEGORIES

VIRGINIA SATIR CATEGORIES - OUR ‘DEFAULT’ MODE

Satir's categories are based on the idea that discrepancies between verbal and non-verbal communications produce double messages; our words are saying one thing and the rest of us something else. This causes problems because my words and my behaviour do not match – they are incongruent.

Essentially, says Satir, these patterns arise when we feel our self-esteem is under attack and so we react defensively. This defence, retaliation or avoidance for example, is what the other person sees and reacts to, so the real problem never gets addressed. Satir says:

"You can see clearly how (this) connects with your communication. You can also see how other people's actions grow out of their communications. It becomes like a merry-go-round."

These four patterns, known as the Satir Categories, frame our responses when we feel that our self-esteem is under attack.

- They are a defence mechanism.
- People Blame, so they appear strong.
- They Placate, so that others don't get angry.
- They Compute, in order to neutralise the threat.
- Or they Distract to draw attention away from the threat.

THE BLAMER

The Blamer is a fault-finder, a dictator, a boss who acts in a superior way that seems to be saying, "Why am I the only one around here who gets things done?" When we are in blaming mode we are only interested in giving orders, criticising and finding fault. Inside, at that moment we don't really feel that we, or our views, count for much.

THE PLACATER

The Placater is submissive and deferential, always aiming to please, apologising, and agreeing, no matter what is said or done. Placaters appear to need someone else's approval. If you want to know how a placater feels, it helps to think of yourself as worthless... you owe everybody gratitude which you not only say but show by your ingratiating behaviour.

THE COMPUTER

Computer behaviour is always correct, totally reasonable, with no show of feeling. The person seems calm, cool, and collected. They could be compared to an actual computer or a dictionary. Their self-worth hides behind big words and intellectual concepts. There is no 'life' in the body at all, everything is happening in the head.

THE DISTRACTER

The Distracter is a master of the irrelevant. That is, irrelevant to the question in hand. This person can't answer directly or to the point. They often appear dizzy, distracted, as if their mind is all over the place. When in distracter mode people can be affable and amiable, but with a gift for non-sequiturs and detours.

THE LEVELLER

Satir's fifth behavioural style is Levelling; adopting an open and honest stance where one's communications are based on both thoughts and feelings. Levelling means that our behaviour and communications are 'congruent'; a chosen response that accurately reflects both our beliefs and our intentions. Levelling parallels the Thomas-Killman Collaborating position, and Satir presents it as the response that most favours effective communications.

REFERENCES

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The Kraybill Inventory: <http://www.riverhouseeepress.com/>