



EVERYTHING **DiSC**[®]
PRODUCTIVE
CONFLICT

A Reference Guide

Introduction

People respond to conflict in many different ways. And while there are healthy ways to deal with conflict, they may not be our go-to responses when we feel threatened or our emotions are heightened. It's our instinct to protect ourselves, leading to some knee-jerk responses that we may not even think about, and some that we may later regret. Why do we do this? The following pages provide some helpful insight into why we may respond to conflict in ways that are unproductive, or even destructive.

Arguing



Arguing

Arguing is unhealthy when it becomes about winning and losing, when the emphasis is no longer on getting at the truth or the best solution. It becomes about protecting our egos and putting other people in their place. And so, like any competition, the “best” strategy is to give up as little ground as possible to your adversary. As a result, any chance for empathy goes out the window. Therefore, in the midst of an argument, one of the most important things we can do is be honest with ourselves about our real motivations. What emotions are fueling me right now? How much is this about winning?

Ask yourself: How much of my response is really about winning?

Belittling



Belittling

By belittling someone, we create a demeaning, one-dimensional caricature of them. Not only does this make it easier to dismiss their opinions, but it can feel extremely satisfying. The power in belittling often comes from putting a label on someone that sums up all of the negative attributes we want to call out. It channels all of the frustrations we have into a single powerful word. And once that succinct label is out there, we can use it to easily dismiss anything else the person has to say.

Ask yourself: What positive characteristics about this person am I choosing to overlook?

Caving In



Caving In

Caving in can be particularly tempting because it often feels like the absolute quickest way to end a disagreement. Even though it typically means sacrificing our legitimate rights, the pain of being in a conflict can be so excruciating that we take immediate shelter in this option. Of course, this short-term gain is often at the expense of long-term satisfaction and can eventually create very unbalanced, unhealthy power dynamics within a relationship.

Ask yourself: What is the long-term cost of giving in right now?

Defensiveness



Defensiveness

When we trust that things will be okay no matter what the outcome of the conflict, there's no reason to be defensive. We can be open to different opinions. On the other hand, at the heart of defensiveness is insecurity. We don't want to admit failure or weakness or inappropriateness. When our brain is telling us that the stakes are incredibly high, we cover up any vulnerabilities or weaknesses. And even when we recognize our defensiveness, it can still be difficult to ask ourselves what, beneath it all, we are really afraid of.

Ask yourself: What am I really afraid of?

Dismissing Opinions



Dismissing Opinions

Dismissing opinions is a blocking strategy to win an argument, but is also a common way to protect our ego. We do this when we're scared of the thoughts or views expressed by another person. We are afraid to give them space to paint a picture that we don't like. And because we feel challenged, insecure, and fearful, we adopt the strategy of overriding the other person. We exude absolute certainty in our position and effectively relieve ourselves from any obligation to hear the other side of the story. And by making the conversation as one-sided as possible, we feel empowered and righteous.

Ask yourself: What am I scared of hearing from the other person?

Drama



Drama

On the surface, melodrama may seem like a simple inability to rein in one's emotions, but this behavior is not always about yelling or acting out. In essence, when we create drama, we are drawing attention to a situation that is troubling for us. This attention validates that the dilemma is, in fact, extremely important and that the injustice that's been done to us is, in fact, extremely unjust. Creating drama can also produce a feeling of control in a situation where we otherwise feel powerless.

Ask yourself: Even if this feels good in the moment, what lasting impression am I leaving on other people?

Exaggerating



Exaggerating

Sometimes a minor offense can still make us extremely upset. In fact, sometimes it's tough to justify the intensity of our emotions given the actual situation. Exaggeration is a way of making the situation sound as bad as it feels. Exaggeration is also empowering. It makes our case seem that much more powerful and defensible because it makes the other person's behavior seem that much more awful.

Ask yourself: What is the actual reason my emotions are so intense right now?

Exclusion



Exclusion

During a conflict, it's not uncommon to exclude someone because we simply don't want to spend time with them. But even if we don't want to admit it, exclusion is also a means to emotionally hurt the other person and an attempt to damage their connection to other people in the group. By disrupting their standing in the group, we gain support for our side of the story. We can shape how people perceive the conflict. Further, we're more likely to use this strategy if we have greater social status than the other person.

Ask yourself: What am I really trying to accomplish by leaving this person out?

Finger-pointing



Finger-pointing

Finger-pointing feels like a very aggressive behavior, but it usually stems from defensiveness. We're diverting attention away from our own shortcoming or failure by pointing it out in someone else. Often, we'll home in on one particular action of the other person that contributed to a problem. The goal is to make this action seem as awful as possible, to make it seem like this action is, in fact, the heart of the problem. By shifting the blame, we've saved our reputation in the short-term, but may have also unwittingly damaged our integrity.

Ask yourself: How have I contributed to the problem, and why am I trying to avoid calling attention to it?

Gossiping



Gossiping

Gossiping can feel good for a lot of reasons. First of all, venting our frustrations can be cathartic. And because we tend to gossip with people we trust, they usually validate our opinion. Not to mention, it can be deeply satisfying to tear down someone who has hurt us. But gossip is also about power. It helps rally people to our side. We get our perspective out into the world first and most convincingly. And, for people who are insecure about their status in the organization, gossiping can create a perceived sense of authority as coworkers turn to them for inside knowledge.

Ask yourself: Is this about venting or about the satisfaction of finding fault in someone else?

Hypercriticism



Hypercriticism

Hypercriticism is an indirect strategy we use to get back at someone. We decide that we'll make a point of objecting to as much about the person as possible. We shoot down their suggestions. We find holes in their logic. We scrutinize their output for mistakes. Basically, we try to punish the person. It's a strategy that's particularly appealing when we recognize that the thing we're actually mad about is a little on the petty side. We know we can't complain about it directly. And so, becoming hypercritical is a way of acting on our anger without having to admit that we're really angry.

Ask yourself: What can I do to more directly express my frustrations?

Overpowering



Overpowering

Overpowering involves drawing on all the sources of power at our disposal to defeat someone during a conflict. Sometimes that power is social or organizational authority, but sometimes it's simply using the force of a strong, vocal personality. Overpowering deliberately keeps others off balance and attempts to eliminate the possibility of a fair, even-handed discussion. In this regard, domineering behavior overrides logic, objectivity, and personal rights when resolving a dispute. This strategy is particularly tempting when we are overcome by a strong, almost primal, urge to “win” the conflict.

Ask yourself: Is this a fair discussion and am I being logical, objective, and respectful?

Passive-aggression

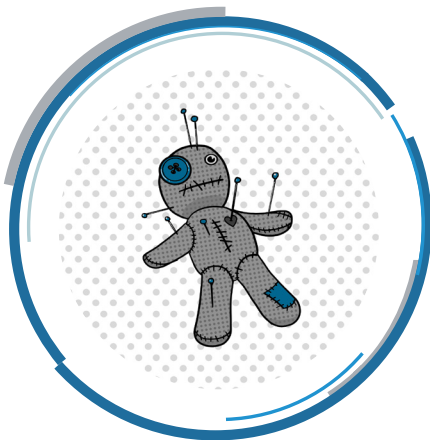


Passive-aggression

We can all think of occasions when we desperately wanted to express anger at someone, but didn't want a full-scale conflict. Passive-aggression can feel like the perfect solution. We get to subtly punish someone—enough that they notice, but not so much that they can call us on it. Its many forms (e.g., ignoring, eye-rolling, nit-picking) make it endlessly flexible. Sometimes the goal is to bother someone enough that they initiate the confrontation, at which point we have an invitation to let loose on them. But whatever the end goal, we may take more satisfaction from it than we care to admit.

Ask yourself: What am I afraid will happen if I am direct?

Revenge



Revenge

Revenge in the workplace is usually fairly subtle, but we do it to restore justice and/or reassert ourselves. And even though taking revenge is technically an external action, it's usually the end result of some pretty deep internal rumination. We stew over being hurt or mistreated, and fantasizing about getting even can feel good—even if we don't like to admit it. Of course, acting on those fantasies takes things to a whole different level. Most of us recognize that overt revenge won't be tolerated, but this still leaves plenty of creative, backhanded, and petty ways to inflict damage on someone.

Ask yourself: Is all the time I spend dwelling on payback actually hurting me more than the other person?

Sabotage



Sabotage

Sabotage is about making sure someone else fails. It can be social in nature (e.g., lying, spreading rumors) or can actually involve physical tampering. Sometimes we choose this extreme path when we lack the power to truly confront the other person, and sometimes it's simply because we want to express our anger without a direct clash. Either way, there is usually a satisfaction in seeing the other person fail. Ultimately, sabotage usually requires us to suspend our normal understanding of right and wrong so that we can rationalize a behavior that, under normal circumstances, we would find reprehensible.

Ask yourself: What personal morals am I sacrificing?

Sarcasm



Sarcasm

In conflict, sarcasm is a close cousin of passive-aggression. It allows us to take a shot at someone or express our hostility without being too obvious about our real motivations. It's for when we're not quite committed enough to yell at someone, but still want to take them down a peg or two. And sarcasm is such a tempting tool in the midst of conflict because we can always claim that "I'm just joking...seriously, lighten up." We feel like the "just kidding" excuse gives us immunity after subtly attacking or demeaning someone.

Ask yourself: If jokes are half-truths, what truth am I unwilling to express?

Stonewalling



Stonewalling

When we stonewall, we make it clear to the other person that communication is completely shut down. We deliberately let them know that their behavior is so unacceptable that we are unwilling to compromise or even discuss a resolution. And although we may hate to admit it, stonewalling can be gratifying. We get to punish the other person while telling ourselves that our behavior is strong and dignified. And, as a bonus, we don't have to wade through the untidiness of conflict. Therefore, this can become a self-preservation strategy when we feel overwhelmed by a swirl of uncomfortable emotions.

Ask yourself: What emotions am I hiding from when I do this?

Withdrawing



Withdrawing

Not many people actually enjoy conflict, but it is much more painful to some of us than others. We may not even know why conflict is so uncomfortable; we just know that it feels like a whirling jumble of anxiety, anger, insecurity, and danger. Every instinct is urging us to return to stability and safety. Withdrawing or clamming up can provide immediate relief by simply shutting out the emotional messiness. We hunker down and wait for it to pass. Of course, this means we don't get to assert our own side of things, but in the moment, deliberately engaging in a conflict can feel overwhelming.

Ask yourself: What's the worst thing that can happen if I say something, and will things be worse if I don't?