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Awareness of conflict styles goes long way in preventing trouble

Recently I mediated a case that highlighted an exercise I often do with law students and professionals to demonstrate how we have different default approaches to conflict, and how conflict can arise when two people have utterly different approaches.

The case involved two administrators in an organization (certain facts have been changed to protect confidentiality) who were working in difficult circumstances and under strict deadlines. Their conflict had escalated to the point that the head of the organization was concerned that a critical deadline essential to customer services would not be met unless I could facilitate an agreement between them to cooperate within the next few days.

The exercise I mentioned is a variation of the well-known Thomas-Kilmann Instrument, which sorts people into default conflict styles. To grossly oversimplify, the styles are:

- Competing (firmly tell them all the well-articulated reasons you are right and ignore the relationship).
- Compromising (work to find tradeoffs or split the difference).
- Collaborating (listen, look for interests and try to find common ground and creative solutions).
- Avoiding (just like it sounds).
- Accommodating (put up with things to preserve the relationship).

In the case of the administrators, whom I'll call Carolyn and Susan, Carolyn clearly used an avoiding style when she sensed conflict on the horizon, while Susan used a competitive style. Carolyn found it difficult to address disagreements directly, and in the face of any opposition, tended to let her ideas about

operations go unsaid.

Susan, on the other hand, was responsible for many employees and customers and got her ideas across by creating many protocols and presenting them assertively.

Susan felt she was just being efficient, while Carolyn came to feel like every interaction with Susan involved criticism. They each felt undermined by the other.

The use of such contrasting conflict styles, of course, shut down communication. For example, when Carolyn's phone would ring and she could see the caller was Susan, the senior administrator, she would feel nervous and would anticipate being attacked in some way about the projects they worked on together.

After many months of worrying about it to the point of losing sleep, Carolyn ultimately filed a formal complaint with the head of the organization.

One of the downsides of an avoiding approach to conflict is that bad feelings build up and then there is an explosion — here, the formal complaint. Susan felt blindsided and hurt by the complaint, having known her co-worker for many years, even as a mentor at one point.

Ironically, being in the position of defending herself from a formal complaint made Susan even less able to hear Carolyn's point of view on how operations ought to take place. Thus, Carolyn's avoiding approach was not very effective.

Similarly, Susan's competitive approach was ineffective with someone like Carolyn as it stopped communication altogether and damaged the relationship.

The conflict approaches of Carolyn and Susan, both of whom I liked very much and who



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were clearly working very hard for the good of their customers, were also apparent in the substance of the dispute about operations. Essentially, it centered on who was going to tell the customers no.

Carolyn, who spent a lot of time listening to and supporting customers, felt telling customers no was incompatible with her role.

Susan was comfortable with telling the customers no, and in fact, had the kind of job where it was up to her to say no to people all day long, but felt she was too busy to have conversations with everyone and wanted to delegate some of that work.

Learning to recognize the differences in each other's approach to conflict was critical to resolving the dispute and creating a new communication plan going forward. Once they could see that the other person was not bad or vicious, but merely employing a different method of dealing with conflict based on her personal background and exposure to conflict styles, they were able to come up with a resolution.

In retrospect, it seems certain that both of the administrators could have benefited, as many of us could, from the ideas in William Ury's book, "The Power of a Positive No." Ury, also one of the authors of "Getting to Yes," teaches that saying no is a three-step process: Yes! No. Yes?

The first Yes! is saying a big yes to our own interests. He compares it to the roots of a strong tree.

The No is saying no to the other person in a respectful way. The no is the trunk of the tree.

The Yes? at the end refers to communicating the no with an invitation to continue the relationship or efforts to reach a possible agreement. The Yes? represents the branches of the tree reaching out to others.

One of the key requirements of this process is that the No is delivered without judgment and by expressing the interests underlying the No.

In the case I mediated, had Carolyn said no to Susan by listening to Susan and then (having already given it some thought) calmly explaining her own interest as providing the best possible service for the customers and the steps she thought would make the most sense based on all of her years of experience, she might have unearthed Susan's equal passion for what was best for the customers. She also could have delivered some nos to the customers in the same way.

Similarly, had Susan delivered her No respectfully to Carolyn and by appealing to shared interests, and followed it with a Yes? suggesting they continue to collaborate on ideas to improve services, they could have had the conversations in the moment that they ended up having in mediation.