

# A Useful Guide to Resolving Conflict



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# A Useful Guide to Resolving Conflict

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## A Useful Guide to Resolving Conflict

### Introduction

#### Who this Useful Guide is aimed at ...

- First line workers in organisations that deal with the public e.g. NHS, Schools and Further Education, Local Councils.
- Customer Service in Retail.
- Managers and Supervisors in potentially difficult situations.

#### What you will be able to do after having worked through the Useful Guide and the exercises

- recognise conflict and its cause
- use different types of communication for different impacts in different situations
- recognise and respond appropriately to assertive behaviour and aggressive behaviour
- recognise and respond appropriately to the differing patterns of behaviour you may encounter
- appropriately manage your own behaviour
- identify and respond appropriately to danger and warning signs
- know when to step in to defuse a situation
- recognise "reasonable force" as it applies to conflict resolution



*There are a number of exercises in this Useful Guide. Where you see this symbol is your opportunity to think about the information discussed and capture your own thoughts and approaches.*

### Stories

There are a number of stories in this Useful Guide which are based on interviews with real people telling their experiences in difficult situations. All the names have been changed.

### Links to other Useful Guides

You might also be interested in reading [A Useful Guide to Dealing with Difficult Behaviour](#), [A Useful Guide to Assertiveness](#) and [A Useful Guide to Diversity](#).

## Toolkit

There are several exercises in the Useful Guide. You can either print out the relevant page and write on the printout or, if you prefer, you can download the MS Word toolkit from [here](#) and do the exercises on your computer.

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## Chapter 1

### Understanding conflict

#### What is conflict? When does it occur?

*Conflict: (difference) A disagreement or clash of ideas, principles or people.*

The dictionary defines "conflict" in a number of different ways ranging from "war", "mental struggle", "plot tension" and "difference". It is the last of these that is usually the issue at work.

Conflict management, then, is about the strategies used to overcome these differences in a positive and effective way. This Useful Guide is about conflict, how it can arise and the things that you can do to resolve conflict satisfactorily. It primarily looks at the downsides of conflict, but it is worth mentioning that conflict does have the potential for positive outcomes as well. Challenge, which often lies at the heart of any conflict, can raise issues that might otherwise get ignored or forgotten. If the end result of any conflict situation is a win-win result, then the outcome can be positive for all.

We will come back to this concept later in the Useful Guide, however, for now let us consider what "conflict" means to you.



*In the space below write down as many words or phrases as you can which define "conflict".*

We have all had experiences of conflict situations, whether at work or at home, or even out and about on our daily business.



*In the space below write down a personal experience that you have had where you have been in conflict with another person. This experience may have led to a verbal or other confrontation with another person. This does not have to be an experience that took place at work; it might have occurred outside work when you were shopping or socialising.*

*We will be using this situation in some of the exercises further on in this Useful Guide.*

Conflict does not always have to include violence, it can be characterised by a range of behaviour types including: ignoring, sniping, going behind someone's back and well as the more obvious examples of physical and verbal abuse.

Throughout this Useful Guide we are going to look at situations where conflict might arise and what might have triggered that conflict. We will look at situations from a number of different angles to help you to understand why conflict happens and what you can do to either prevent it happening or manage the situation when needed.



## The Impact of Workplace Violence

It has been recognised that workplace conflict can be severely damaging to health. Not just the physical impact of any specific attack but also the psychological impact of dealing with threatening behaviour on a regular basis. Because of this there is now common acceptance of the need to define workplace violence in broad and all-inclusive terms:

**Incidents where the person is abused, threatened or assaulted in circumstances relating to their work, involving an explicit or implicit challenge to their safety, well-being or health.**

**European Commission DG-V**

This broad definition has been adopted to recognise that the impacts go beyond physical violence and accepts that threats and verbal abuse are much more common.

This Useful Guide does not attempt to cover all areas of conflict as this will vary considerably across different organisations and job roles. However, it does look at the background to reasons why conflict can arise, what is happening and some practical solutions to dealing with conflict when it arises.

## Why does Conflict Happen?

Most conflict occurs because the parties involved feel a loss of control. Either someone else is in control which they don't like, or no one is in control and there is a feeling of void.

Conflict therefore becomes one of their strategies for getting the situation back in control.

So what does someone who is upset and maybe feeling vulnerable need/want?

### *1. They want to be acknowledged.*

They want to know that someone has recognised their "pain" and is going to respond to it. Difficult behaviour is often a cry for help.

*2. They want help.*

People only usually get upset if there is an issue that needs to be resolved and it is not being resolved to their satisfaction.

*3. They want choices.*

One of the ways to reduce conflict is to give people choices. This makes them feel that they are part of the decision making process.

*4. They need boundaries.*

People rarely want to spend their time feeling wound up, frustrated and wanting to kick off at any moment. The fact that many people do, is more of a reflection of their feeling of lack of control and a lack of boundaries. When working with children, the setting of boundaries of acceptable and unacceptable behaviour is an important development tool. If those boundaries have not been set effectively then learned behaviours can set in which are outside the acceptable "norms".

## Understanding conflict triggers

Conflict can occur in a wider range of situations at work, but some of the most common are ...

- Dealing with customers
- Dealing with patients and their relatives
- Dealing with students (at school/college)
- Conflict situations between staff
- Disciplining staff/others

Research by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE2006) shows that the most common factors in triggering conflict are ...

- Impatience
- Frustration - due to lack of information or boredom
- Anxiety - due to lack of choice, space
- Resentment - having no say in decisions or right to appeal decisions
- Drink, drugs or inherent aggression





*Thinking about the situation you wrote about earlier answer the questions below. If you can't think of a suitable situation then choose one of the stories found later in the Useful Guide.*

***Who was involved?***

***When did it happen? What was the trigger?***

***What was the outcome?***

***Was it resolved?***

## Diversity awareness

Throughout this Useful Guide we will talk about some of the "norms" that we expect when we deal with people. This includes personal space, mannerisms, traps and triggers etc.

Valuing diversity for more detailed guidance please see [A Useful Guide to Diversity](#)) means appreciating the difference between ourselves and others. Everyone expects to be treated in a way that respects his or her individuality. This means we need to take care we do not stereotype individuals and when dealing with conflict to be able to recognise, as far as we can, if our cultural norms do not match the person we are dealing with. We all wish ...

- to be treated with respect
- to have our wishes and choices recognised and listened to
- to have our beliefs, culture and race, sexual identity, physical and mental condition recognised and respected
- to be communicated to in ways that we understand and value us as people
- to have our need for privacy and confidentiality respected

If these wishes are not met then we are likely to feel devalued and hurt. Communicating with people from other cultures, especially where language is an issue, is often a cause of anxiety and can result in misunderstandings. These misunderstandings can be heightened if the situation is under pressure such as when someone is injured or ill, or there is an issue with a child at school, or simply a sense of injustice for some reason. Language is only one aspect of communication and cultural awareness and interpretation, whilst going a long way, should not replace human empathy and genuine understanding in difficult situations.

Always keep in mind the adage: "How would I feel in this situation? How would I like to be treated?"

## Chapter 2

### Patterns of Behaviour

In this chapter we are going to look at the causes of most day to day conflict and some of the things that are going on in the background. We will cover ...

- Traps and triggers
- Attitude and behavioural cycle
- Patterns of behaviour
- Assertiveness vs. Aggression

### What are Traps and Triggers?

Traps and Triggers tend to occur when you are ambushed by feelings or memories which alter the way you react to a situation. These usually happen when you are unaware of what is influencing you at the time.

So for example ...

- A regular meeting or task which you dread
- Dealing with a query from a particular company or individual who you have had problems with before
- A person you disliked from the moment you met them - who now constantly does things which irritate you
- A day when nothing seems to go right, however hard you try

Traps and Triggers are important when you are dealing with other people because they can influence how you react and how the conversation and relationship develops. If there is something getting in the way it is worth finding out what it is so that you can deal with it.

So what is happening?

Each day we encounter situations in which what others say or do has an impact on our own response. We can sometimes be affected and respond in an interaction, without fully realising what is going on. This can happen in a number of ways ...

**Projection:** Positive or negative moods can cloud our realistic assessment of people or situations. We project our feelings onto the other person.

**Transference:** This can be positive or negative. Our feelings for a person are coloured by memories of someone whom they remind us of. So for example, you might take an irrational dislike to someone because they remind you of a politician that you don't agree with.

**Triggers:** Something which causes a reaction - positive or negative. This can be a powerful memory, a past experience, a cultural difference... Triggers are not always obvious. They are however, often complex. An incident which reminds someone of a bad occurrence in childhood, a person who always annoys us, a noise associated with a threat, even a smell associated with a bad time, such as someone's perfume whom you associate with a relationship break-up can act as a trigger.

**Blind Spots:** Our blind spots are the opposite of a trigger - something which should arouse a response but does not. For example, you may react in a practical way when someone you are working with reacts on an emotional level. A car mechanic sees only the engine, body and wheels, whereas you might see the car as not only a way to get around, but as a friend. People often name their cars!

**Anxiety:** Anxiety is our reaction to both real and perceived threats. So if our working environments involve us in situations which involve abuse or threats we may become anxious over time. Equally the fear of failure, humiliation or not being up-to-date with information or other perceived threats to our position or power can create an internal sense of anxiety. Losing face in front of our colleagues because we don't know the answer to a question thrown at us in a meeting for example.

**Personal Needs:** Ignoring our own needs can lead to stress and impact very negatively on our interactions. We need to keep this in mind and take any steps which are required (such as asking for help in stressful situations) in order to meet our own needs. Then we can be more effective in the workplace.

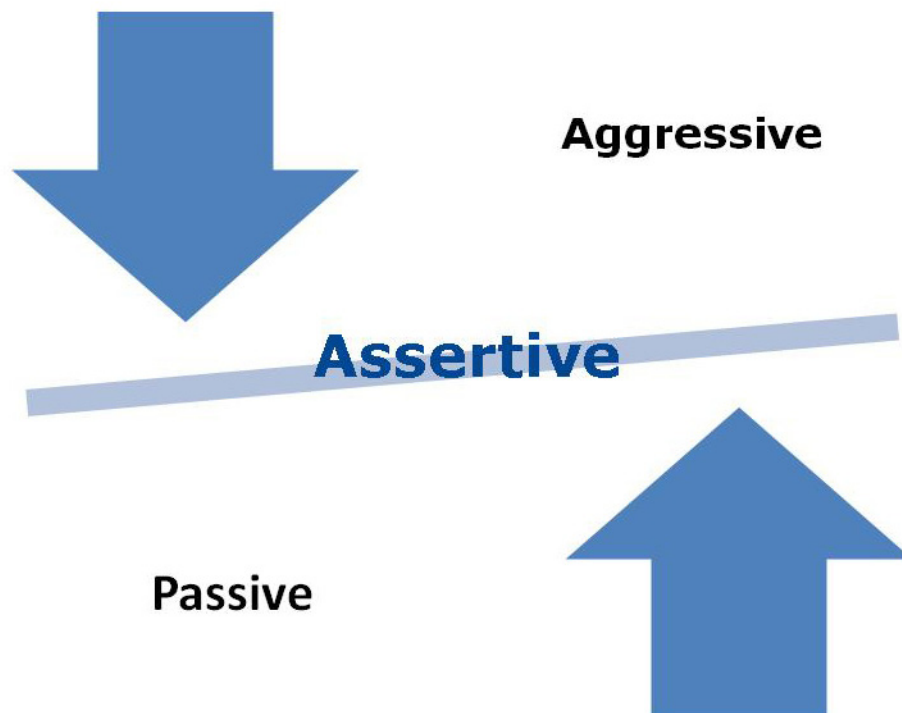


*Identify any Traps or Triggers that you might have reacted to recently? Maybe a person you deal with on a regular basis? Or a situation you would normally avoid?*

Learning to identify your own traps and triggers will help you to recognise in advance when they might become an issue. You will also start to become more aware of how to deal with them, both for yourself and for others. Seemingly irrational response to stimuli can become clearer making them easier to understand and react appropriately.

### **Assertiveness vs Aggressiveness**

The diagram below shows the seesaw between Passive behaviour and Aggressive behaviour. Assertive behaviour sits on the seesaw roughly in the middle, moving when necessary to keep the balance.



#### **Passive behaviour tends to be demonstrated as ...**

- own wants and needs suppressed
- lack of self confidence
- laid back
- does not react to intimidation
- hides feelings
- willing to go with the flow

**Aggressive behaviour is demonstrated by ...**

- use of verbal and physical intimidation
- getting what you want any way possible
- expressing feelings at the expense of others
- no recognition of the rights of others

**Assertive behaviour is shown by ...**

- feelings being expressed openly when appropriate
- able to ask for what you want/need
- balance your needs against the needs of others
- feel confident and self-assured
- will listen and respect others points of view



*Each behaviour type has its advantages and disadvantages. What are some of these?*

	Positive	Negative
Passive		
Aggressive		
Assertive		

My suggested answers can be seen [here](#).





*Thinking about a situation when dealing with conflict how would an Aggressive and an Assertive person react in the table below?*

	Aggressive	Assertive
<b>How do People FEEL?</b>		
<b>What do People DO?</b>		
<b>How do People BEHAVE?</b>		
<b>Why do People BEHAVE in this way?</b>		

When in a conflict situation, ideally you need to stay in an assertive frame of mind. Remember an Assertive person will ...

- Respect the opinions and actions of others - even if they do not agree with them
- Give an honest opinion
- Express positive or negative feelings
- Say when they are angry - providing that anger is justified
- Say 'No' or 'Yes' appropriately!
- Accept responsibility for their own actions
- Use the 'I' word to own what they say
- Be willing to negotiate

### ***Staying Assertive - Avril's Story***

*Avril works in a sales return area for faulty touch screens. The company has a policy of free replacements if the goods are "dead on arrival" provided they call within 14 days.*

*Bob received his screen but did not open it for a month. When he did so he found that it was faulty. He was not happy. He called the company and got Avril on the phone.*

*The customer said, "It's not fair!"*

*Avril explained the 14 day policy again.*

*Bob said, "This is not acceptable! I will get Trading Standards involved." He was rude, offensive and unpleasant.*

*Avril's initial reaction was to listen to the client and empathise with him. She appreciated that he was upset and why, but needed to keep to the point.*

*Bob demanded to speak to the manager who supported Avril's stand, explained again to Bob the 14 day rule. However, he left it open to Avril to negotiate with the client a possible alternative option.*

*By the time Bob came back to Avril he had started to calm down and was prepared to negotiate. Avril was able to offer to collect the monitor free of charge and would repair it with a 10% discount.*

*By keeping calm and being assertive, allowing the client to blow through the frustration, repeating the policy until it was understood and then being prepared to negotiate a solution the client felt that they had been heard but the company did not have to bear the full cost of the repairs.*

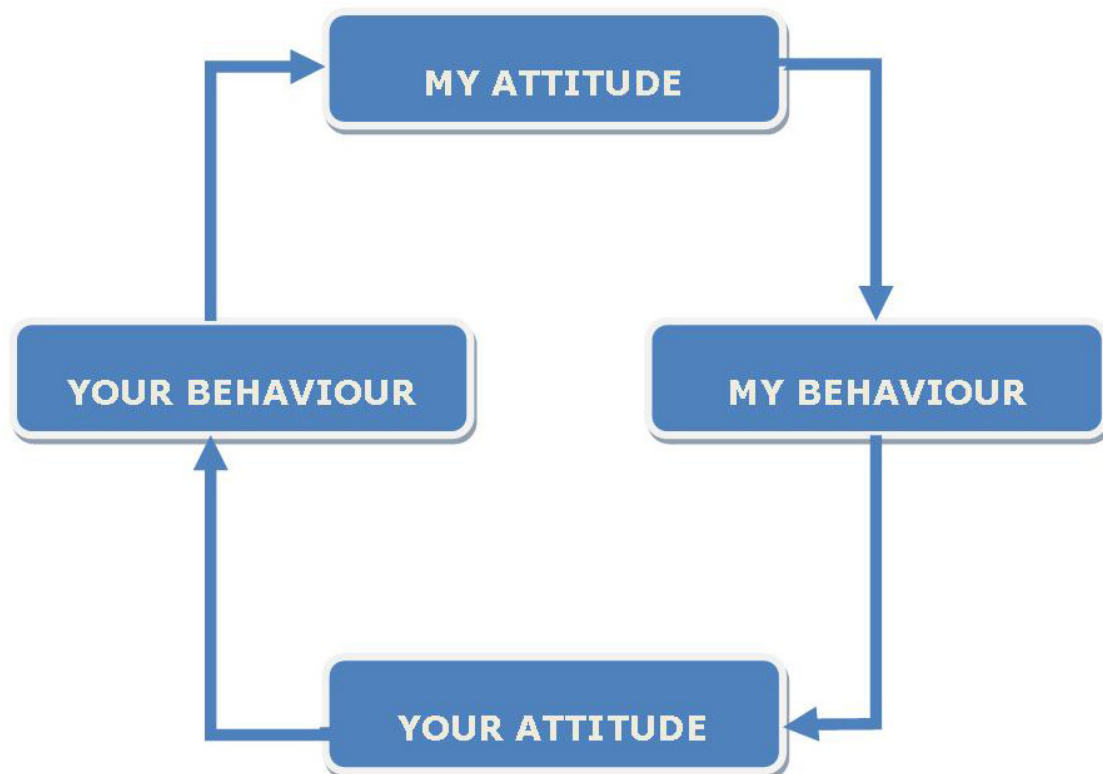
## Attitude and behavioural cycle

### (Sometimes known as Betaris Box)

The attitude and behavioural cycle demonstrates the behaviour that people from all backgrounds may exhibit when interacting with others.

It is a cycle of behaviour that can escalate out of control. If your attitude or emotions towards another are hostile, this will be displayed in your behaviour.

This, in turn, may affect the attitude or emotions of the individual you are dealing with, which, in turn, will affect their behaviour, and so on.



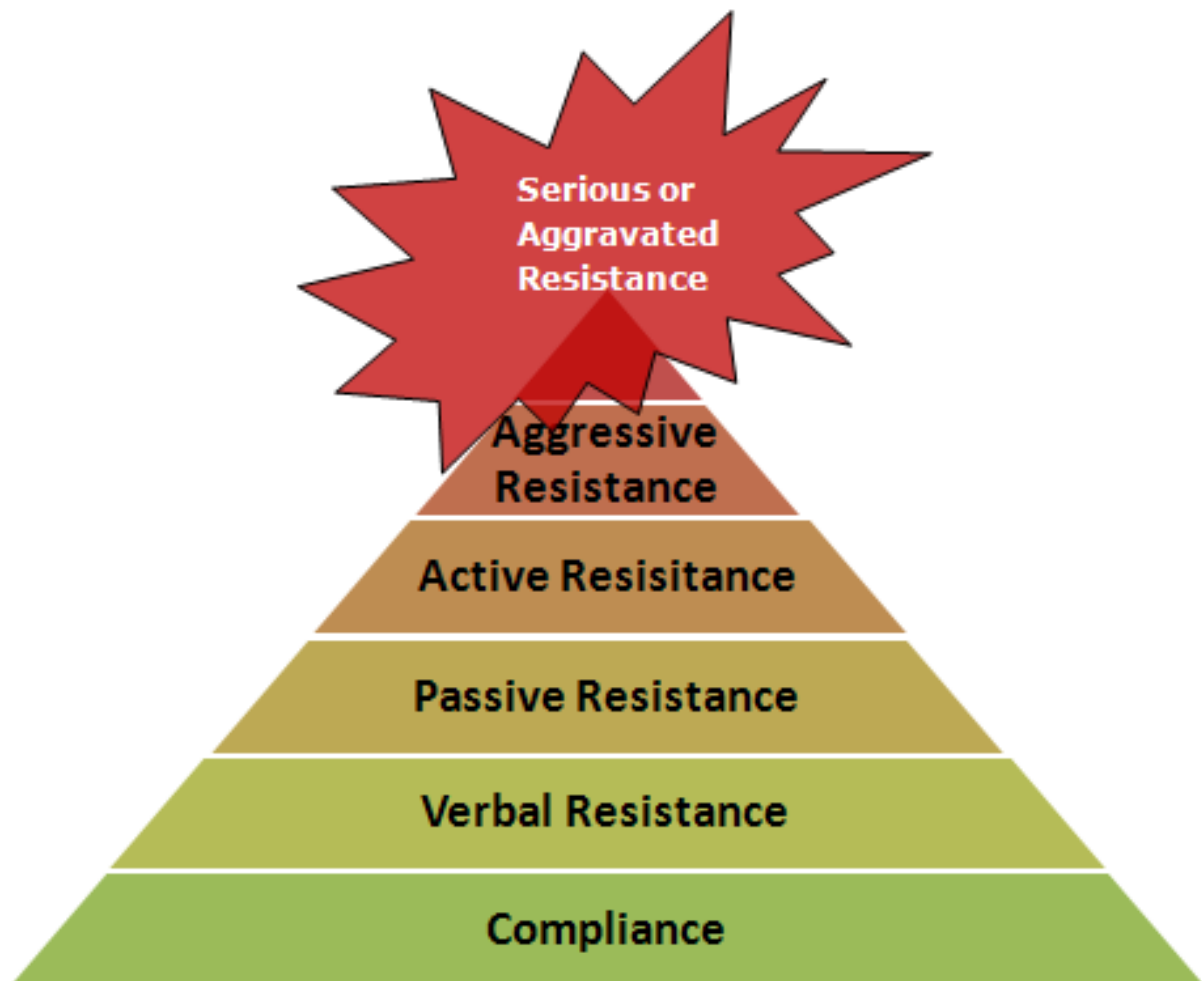
It will be your responsibility to recognise this cycle and break it if it is escalating out of control. This must be done before you can move on.

Whilst you can manage your own behaviour, the communication models in chapter 2 may help you to influence the attitude and behaviour of the other person.

## Patterns of behaviour

We all have the potential in today's stressful world to behave a little like a volcano – our behaviour becoming more explosive as we become stressed or affected by the situations around us. **Patterns of behaviour** help us to recognise how a person's behaviour may escalate during a conflict situation.

Recognising these patterns can help us to react before a situation becomes dangerous.



Although someone may progress through these stages in the order shown above, certain factors, including drugs, alcohol and a person's mental health, could cause them to jump between stages without warning. Always remember to consider your own personal safety before attempting to deal with another person's behaviour.



*Thinking about the occasion on page 12 when you reacted to the Trap or Trigger...*

*How did your behaviour help/hinder the situation?*

*Would you have reacted differently if you had known what was going on? How? What will you do differently next time?*

*Did you remain assertive or did you become aggressive? What about the other person?*

*Which level did you reach on the Resistance Volcano?*

*How do you recognise Traps and Triggers in others?*

### ***Obtaining Information - Jake's story***

*To get government funding for a Youth Drop-in Centre for difficult and disruptive youths, it is necessary to collect information about the people who use the centre. In this instance, Ameera was attempting to collect information from a group of 3 "hard to reach" young men. One of these lads, Paul, was drawing obscene pictures and words whilst she was interviewing them and showing her these to bait her. His mates were laughing and encouraging him. Ameera was trying to ignore him, but was obviously getting increasingly upset.*

*Jake, a worker at the centre decided to intervene. He explained to Paul that his behaviour was unacceptable and would result in him being excluded from the centre. After some verbal sparring, Paul said that he was only messing around. Jake reiterated that the behaviour would lead to exclusion. He managed to talk to Paul on his own and got him to understand that the behaviour was not acceptable. In this instance, Paul became embarrassed by his own behaviour and eventually apologised to both Ameera and others in the room.*

*By setting boundaries of acceptable behaviour and consequences if they are not adhered to the conflict was resolved and ultimately removed.*



## Chapter 3

### How We Communicate

One of the main causes of conflict can be a breakdown in communication. In this chapter we will look at different types of communication including ...

- Non-verbal communication
- Verbal communication
- Transactional analysis - ego states
- Inner voices

We communicate in a variety of different ways. For many of us what we say is what we mean but that can often be misinterpreted. There are many reasons for this: language barriers, misuse of words, using the wrong words, the other party not listening, etc. But there are other forces at play.

Communication skills are central to any activity which involves working well with people whether it's in a team, one-to-one, working in groups or in meetings.

Being a good communicator gives you a positive image and helps you to deal more professionally with people and problems ...

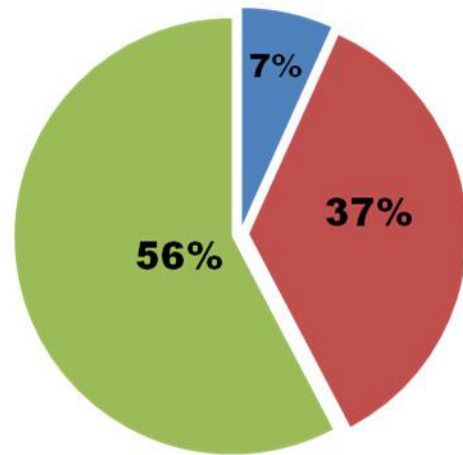
1. It makes you more personally effective at home and at work
2. Helps you to speak out and give your opinion
3. Gives you a positive and professional image
4. Enables you to deal with problem people and situations

## Non-verbal communication

In 1971, American psychologist [Albert Mehrabian](#) published his most famous but often misquoted research on communication. This research, which is still relevant today, emphasised the importance of non-verbal communication, referring to the signals that we give another person and the way we interpret the signals given by them.

- ▶ 7% of meaning depends on the words you use
- ▶ 37% of meaning depends on the intonation and expression in your voice
- ▶ 56% of meaning depends on your body language

(Source: Mehrabian A. (1971) *Silent Messages*)



***What are some examples of non-verbal communication?***

## Verbal communication

In Mehrabian's research he found that 37% of the meaning of what was being said was dependent on the intonation and expression in your voice. So whilst the sentiment behind "Have a nice day!" may be correct, if said in the wrong way it can cause offence.



*What are some examples of ways in which the sentence "Have a nice day!" can be said which could cause offence?*

## The Use of Language

Language is powerful. The misuse of language can make people feel excluded, labelled and disrespected, regardless of whether the speaker intended it or not.

Think about the situation you considered on page 5. Did you identify any language which ...

- stereotyped an individual?
- was demeaning?
- excluded individuals?
- suggested a pre-judgement of the individuals or groups?

How might you avoid that in the future?

## Active Listening

Communication is a two way process.

Hearing the words that someone speaks and then replying is not enough to show that you are really listening. You need to process the information the words give in your mind and react to them.

There are four basic levels of listening ...

1. **Ignoring** - not consciously paying attention
2. **Superficial** - where we make the nods and motions of listening but are not taking the information on board
3. **Content level** - taking in the detail of the conversation but not recognising the emotional level
4. **Empathic listening** - listening not only to what is said but also how it is being said. This involves paying attention to body language, tone of voice, gestures etc to gain insight into how someone is feeling, and whether there is consistency between the content of what they are saying and how it comes across.

Active listening involves responding with encouraging signals, both verbal and non verbal and giving the speaker your full attention.

Non verbal signals include the appropriate grunts, sighs, laughs and other simple sounds which demonstrate that you are listening. Your body language and facial expression will also show whether you are attending to what the other person is saying.

Verbal signals include adjusting the pace and volume of your speech to match that of the other person. In practice, in a conversation which is going well, both people will do this so that a balance is quickly achieved.

## Eye contact

Maintaining good eye contact is a very important part of good one-to-one communication. This does NOT mean developing a staring contest!

Eye contact breaks, rejoins and develops a rhythm during a conversation. Micro signals are exchanged - contraction or expansion of the iris of the eye for example - which help the smooth flow of communication.

Observing the other person visually gives many clues which help you understand how the other person is reacting to you and to what you are saying.

Eye contact needs to be used sensitively in conflict situations to ensure that the other party does not see it as a challenge. Breaking eye contact can sometimes be useful to defuse a situation.

## Parent, Adult or Child?

### Transactional analysis - ego states

One of the underlying factors that effects how we communicate and how it is perceived is how we use different parts of our personality in our transactions with other people.

[Dr. Eric Berne](#) identified back in the 1950s that there are three aspects to our personalities that affect us every day. Within all of us we have the ability to move between these three states continuously. They affect the way we behave and in particular the way they inter-relate to other people.

These three states are the basis of a theory called Transactional Analysis. Simply put they are ...

**PARENT**- This is where values and opinions lie. We use it when we are looking after, supporting, judging and taking responsibility for ourselves and others.

**ADULT**- We use the adult state when being rational, objective and calculating. Rational decision making and important decisions need this part of the personality.

**CHILD** - We use child when we are being emotional, intuitive, creative, manipulative, rebellious, submissive. We need child in order to have fun, be spontaneous and inspired.

A fully rounded personality needs all three parts of the personality functioning and used appropriately.

In the diagram on the next page you can see how these states are connected. You can also see how they can be expanded into ...

- Controlling Parent
- Nurturing Parent
- Adult
- Adapted Child
- Free Child

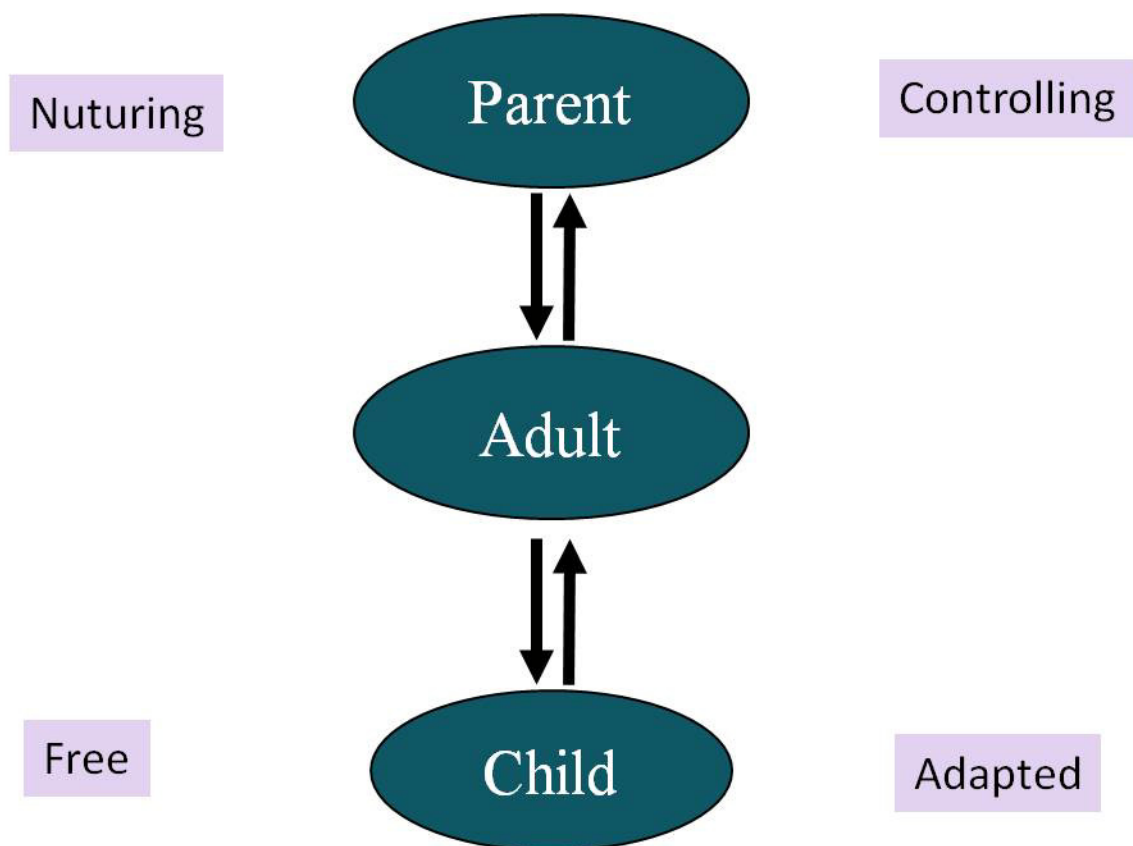
Each of these states can in turn have both negative and positive aspects.

**Controlling parents** display negative disciplinarian behaviour and make statements that are critical of others, such as ...

- Don't do that again!
- How many times do I have to tell you?
- Don't slouch – what sort of image do you think that portrays?

They can also display positive behaviours when an element of control is protecting another person from harm such as ...

- Don't cross the road when it is not safe!
- Make sure you have had the brakes checked on your car



*Transactional analysis*

*Ref: 'I'm OK, You're OK' by Thomas A. Harris*



**Nurturing parents** display positive teaching, caring, supportive, loving and consoling behaviour and commonly use statements such as ...

- Don't worry, we can work it out.
- Let me help you with that.
- Come with me and let's have a cup of tea.

Nurturing Parents can also show negative behaviour by being over protective and use phrases like ...

- You can't possibly do that! Let me do that for you! (when the person should do it for themselves)

The **adult** ego state is characterised by factual, mature, logical and rational behaviour. It is the state that offers least or, even, no conflict. Adults make statements such as ...

- You are right, I have spelt that wrongly – thank you.
- Can we try to avoid any misunderstanding?
- I think this might work; what do you think?

Negative **adapted children** may display behaviours that they have learned that can be manipulative and play on a person's emotions. They will use statements such as ...

- Why me? It's always me! It's not fair.
- If you loved me, you would do it.
- Okay! I will throw it away if you don't like it.

Positive **adapted children** however, will follow rules and understand boundaries. A certain amount of adaptation is a desirable thing if society is to work well.

The positive **free child** state is characterised by loving behaviour that is instinctive, spontaneous and emotional. Free children make statements such as ...

- Yahoo! I've won, I've won!
- Oh brilliant! Just what I wanted.
- Let's party!

But a **free child** can also show negative characteristics and be disruptive, not follow rules and be selfish.

## Theory vs Practice

In any relationship we can adopt each of these characteristics backwards and forwards in the course of one conversation. Consider the following conversation ...

A: What are you doing?

B: Nothing!

A: That's Ok then. You can come and play a game of football with me.

B: No, I don't want to!

A: Oh go on! I don't like playing on my own!

B: Why don't we watch TV instead?

A: Because that's boring! Ok what about hide and seek?

B: No that's too dangerous. Last time you got lost. Anyway I always lose playing against you. You cheat!

A: Don't!

B: Do!

A: How many times do I have to tell you not to exaggerate?

B: Come on let's have a hug and a cup of tea and a slice of cake.

Who is the parent and who is the child in this conversation? Do either of them ever take on an adult role?

A and B are switching backwards and forwards between the different roles and this is not unusual in conversations. This switchback ride in conversations is used in plays and TV soaps all the time and the reason that it is successful is because that is how we often talk back and forth, particularly with people we know well.

The main problem comes when we always adopt a particular characteristic in any relationship.

To always play the "parent" for example means that you are always trying to control.

Always being a "child" may mean adopting an emotional stance, without the rationality that the "adult" can bring.

The “adult” in us helps us to think and behave in a rational way, but it is a state that can be difficult to maintain.

The good news is that once we are aware of these different states, and when we are likely to use them, we can adopt a different position when we choose.

The chart below shows the types of phrases that different states may use.

EGO STATE	TYPICAL WORDS & PHRASES	BEHAVIOUR/ EXPRESSIONS	TYPICAL ATTITUDES
<b>Controlling Parent</b>	Disgraceful Ought to Always	Furrowed brow Pointing finger	Condescending Judgemental
<b>Nurturing Parent</b>	Well done	Benevolent smile Pat on the back	Caring Permissive
<b>Adult</b>	How? When? Where? What?	Relaxed Attentive	Open-minded Interested
<b>Adapted Child</b>	Please can I? I'll try harder	Vigorous head nodding Whiny voice	Compliant Defiant Complaining
<b>Free Child</b>	I feel great!	Uninhibited Laughing with someone	Curious Fun-loving Spontaneous



*Think of recent difficult situations you have had to deal with – they may be personal or work related ...*

- *Which state did you use predominantly?*
- *What messages do you think you were sending out?*
- *What impact might that have had on the other person?*
- *How effective were you in resolving the discord?*

## Crossed Communication

Watch out for Crossed Communication. A crossed communication occurs when a person responds from an inappropriate ego state. For example, if a person is in a Negative Parent they may push you into Child. A Negative Parent saying "don't do that again" might get the response "it wasn't me!".

### ***When Childish Behaviour Provokes a Childish Response - Rick's Story***

*Rick works in a mobile phone store. When approached by Ben for some mobile cases he showed him some of the cases that were behind the counter. He then suggested that Ben might like to look at the other cases that were hanging on the wall in the shop. Whilst Ben went off to do this, he turned to the next customer.*

*Ben immediately shouted across the store "Do you want to sell me a case or not? Your customer service is terrible!"*

*Rick's response was: "Goodbye then!"*

*Ben shouted back: "This is \*\*\*\*\* disgusting! Your customer service stinks!"*

*Rick replied: "There's the door! I'll call security next!"*

*Ben exclaimed: "Go on then!" He then ambled towards the door continuing to mumble.*

*In this case, Ben's childish reaction to his disappointment that Rick had switched his attention to someone else immediately created a childish response from Rick. Whilst Rick may have been right that it was not worth trying to serve Ben once he had adopted this attitude, nevertheless, a less childish reaction may have produced a less threatening atmosphere which was less unpleasant for other customers.*

An emotional and instinctive response which leaves the person feeling uncomfortable is often part of a crossed communication.



*Look at the following phrases. Which ego state are they coming from? What might be an appropriate response? Which ego state are they coming from?*

For Read Our Aud Readers: The following table has 4 columns, and 8 rows

Phrase	Ego State?	Possible Response	Ego State?
Poor thing looks tired. She should take a rest.		Yes I agree. It's been terrible for her!	
What are the facts?		How should I know!	
What a fantastic idea!		You will be careful won't you!	
You're always having a go at me!		No. I don't but on this occasion I would like you to consider ...	
Why don't you just get on with your work?		Why don't you get on with yours! You are always sticking your nose in!	
Did you see the match last night? What a fantastic win.		Yes. Brilliant!	
I'm not sure I understand. Would you explain it to me again, please?		Yes of course.	
Look, I know I made a mess of that report, but please give me a chance to do it again – I know I could do it better next time. Please!		You're always getting it wrong. You must try harder!	



You're right. I have written it down incorrectly. Thanks for pointing it out to me.		Oh that's alright. I know how difficult it is to get these things right. You poor thing.	
Do you realise that I called you over an hour ago? Where have you been?		I'm so sorry. Please forgive me. It won't happen again!	
How do you think your first presentation went?		It was great. They loved the stories!	

My suggested answers can be seen by clicking [here](#).

If you choose to move to the adult state you may succeed in hooking the other person into adult too. This is often the most appropriate communication in the workplace or when dealing with customers, patients, staff and colleagues. See Ruth's Story.

### Hooking into Adult - Ruth's Story

*Working in any sort of customer service role can lead to conflict. Even lipstick can have its pitfalls!*

*A customer, Laura, was after a particular colour lipstick. It was her favourite colour from a premium make up supplier. She visited her local department store and went to Ruth on the make-up counter to make her purchase. Unfortunately, this colour was out of stock. Laura was not happy. She was highly patronising. Her attitude was that she was more important than Ruth who was serving her and it was unreasonable to have run out of stock of this particular colour. She started to shout about how she was sure that they had the lipstick, Ruth was just not looking properly.*

*Having assured Laura that she had looked more than once, Ruth responded by calling the other department stores in the town to see if they had the colour in stock. They didn't. In fact, it was not in stock in the warehouse, they were waiting for it to come in. The situation was finally resolved, by ordering the lipstick from the warehouse to be delivered as soon as it was in stock.*

*By staying calm and in control, Ruth kept on top of the situation and was able to hook Laura into an adult ego state to resolve the situation.*

## **Inner voices**

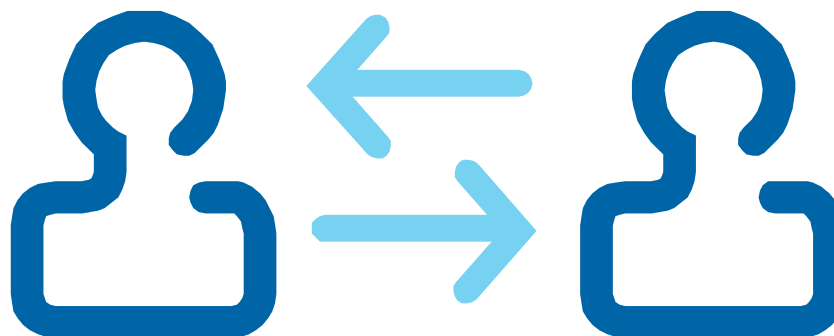
We all have inner voices. These are those nagging voices which tick away in the back of our minds all of the time. They can be a major distraction to focusing and can prevent us from concentrating on the job in hand. They can also cause us to react inappropriately in particular circumstances. So, for example, if part of our upbringing has been to consider a particular turn of phrase or type of person in either a positive or negative light then our inner voice will remind us of this when we come up against any particular trigger.

Learning when and when not to listen to our inner voice is important to remain in adult mode.

## Chapter 4

### Breakdown in communication - When things go wrong

Below is a simple diagram of a model of communication. In this instance messages are transmitted and received (whether verbal or non-verbal) and then interpreted by the receiver.



Sometimes even the simplest communication can be plagued by interference.



*In the box, write down as many forms of interference, which might prevent the message from getting through.*

**Some examples of causes of breakdowns in communication could include ...**

not listening	cultural differences	stress
language differences	triggers	too quiet/ too loud
background noise	jargon	body language
stereotyping	confused state	emotional state
anger	alcohol	verbal content

The list is not exhaustive and different situations may present differing problems in communicating effectively.

It is essential that we are aware of and recognise the causes of breakdowns in communication.

## Warning and danger signs

Having looked at **how** we communicate, we will now look at the signs and signals that other people may display when they become agitated during a potential conflict situation. When we consider conflict resolution, we must be able to recognise when the conflict is about to escalate.

The left-hand column of the table below shows some of the **warning** signs. They indicate that the person is getting angry and that they feel they have to exert their presence verbally. If you can recognise these and use the models we have discussed already, you may be able to prevent the onset of **danger** signs.

**Danger** signs are the body's natural reactions to the possibility of physical contact. If you are witnessing **danger** signs, the best option may be to withdraw and seek assistance from your colleagues, security staff or the Police.

Warning Signs	Danger Signs
Direct, prolonged eye contact	Fists clench and unclench
Facial colour may darken	Facial colour may become paler
Head is back	Lips tighten over teeth
Subject stands tall	Head drops to protect throat
Subject kicks the ground	Eyebrows droop to protect eyes

Warning Signs	Danger Signs
Large movements close to people	Hands rise above the waist
Breathing rate accelerates	Shoulders tense
Behaviour may stop/start abruptly	Stance moves from square to sideways
	Stare is now at intended target
	Lowering of body to launch forward

## Impact factors - Risk assessment

Impact factors are the considerations we must identify when dealing with any conflict – like carrying out a mini risk assessment of the situation we are in.

You must assess your impact factors and include what you consider the other person's impact factors to be.

### For example ...

The person you are talking to is tall, appears fit and healthy and is well-built.

He is becoming agitated and louder. You are much shorter, lighter in build and have a wrist injury. You have knowledge of martial arts. If the situation became physical, could you deal with it? Are you the best person to deal with this man?

Now consider that this person is on crutches with a plaster cast on his arm and leg. Have the impact factors changed? Could you now deal with this person?



*Think about your own working environment; what other impact factors can you think of? Add them to the chart below...*

People	Objects	Places
Sex – Age – Size – Build	Alcohol	Excessive noise
Specialist Knowledge	Drugs	Safe exits/layout
Skill – boxing/martial arts	Potential weapons (objects that could be used to cause injury)	Public or private premises

People	Objects	Places
Mental state	Offensive weapons (deliberately made to cause injury)	Being in a position of disadvantage
Numbers present	Items of value	Slip/trip hazards
Tiredness or exhaustion (physical or mental)	Time of day	Imminent danger

For Word and Excel Readers: The table has finished

## Distances

Distance between you and other people should not be overlooked. Distance can give us time to think and then react. We naturally allow certain people closer; we often give others a wide berth. However we may not have that luxury. If you are in the health sector for example, caring for someone means invading their personal space and it is important to remember this can make them feel uncomfortable or anxious.

We have to understand what 'safe' distances are and how they can help with conflict resolution.

<b>INTIMATE ZONE</b>	(less than 18 inches)	Close family/partners
<b>PERSONAL ZONE</b>	(18 inches to 4 feet)	People we know
<b>SOCIAL ZONE</b>	(4 feet to 12 feet)	Most other people

Bear in mind, these spaces may vary by culture and understanding cultural norms in this instance can be highly beneficial. One way to overcome this is wherever possible to ask first.

## Reactionary gap

Having looked at the distances we are familiar with, we must now look at the distance we should adopt when dealing with conflict. This distance is known as the '**reactionary gap**'.

The 'reactionary gap' is the distance between the extremities of your reach and the extremities of your opponent's reach... their reach includes any weapons they may have!

## The Youth Drop-in Centre – James' Story

*James works at a Youth Drop-in Centre for disruptive and difficult teens. On one occasion, Rod, a young man from a poor background with little education, lost his temper over a minor argument with the Centre Manager, Amy.*

*Amy was heavily pregnant and, when the argument began to grow, became vulnerable. Rod, who lacked any temper control, picked up a stool and threw it at her. It missed but he started to shout and swear and threaten Amy and the baby. James decided he had to step in.*

*James stood in front of Amy, about 4-5 feet away from Rod, to act as a shield. He stood with his arms open and at a 8:20 position (as on a clock face), palms out, eyebrows raised and asked: "Are you OK? What is the problem? Can we talk about this?" He kept his voice low and quiet and non-threatening.*

*James maintained this pose, repeating his questions and also saying "It's fine. Let's talk about this." Gradually Rod calmed down and sat down enabling James to speak to him further. After 5 minutes, Rod got up and left. He was not allowed back into the centre for 6 months as this is one of the rules if anyone displays violent behaviour.*

## Chapter 5

### Strategies for Managing Conflict

#### Thinking Win/Win

In Stephen Covey's Useful Guide, Seven Habits of Highly Effective People, he identifies the 6 paradigms or concepts of human interaction. These are important when dealing with conflict as they are drivers to our behaviour in difficult situations.

##### **Win/Win**

Win/Win is a frame of mind that seeks to accommodate all participants and gain mutual benefit for all. Win/Win means that interactions end in results where all parties are happy and all parties feel good about the outcome. It is based on the paradigm that there is plenty for everyone and one person's success is achieved without expense or exclusion to anyone else. It considers life as a cooperative arena, not a competitive one. It is a state of mind to strive for even if it is difficult to reach.

##### **Win/Lose**

Win/Lose says "If I win, you lose." In leadership style it is an authoritarian approach. "I get my way; you don't get yours." Win/Lose people have a tendency to use position and power, credentials, possessions or personality to get their way. Win/Lose is a dominant style in conflict situations where winning one over on one's opponent becomes an imperative.

##### **Lose/Win**

People who think Lose/Win are usually quick to appease or please. They often have low self esteem and are therefore looking for strength from popularity or acceptance. They often lack courage to express their own feelings and convictions and are easily intimidated by others. Sometimes, however, the impact of suppressing their true feelings can "boil over" and they overreact to minor provocation with anger or cynicism.

##### **Lose/Lose**

Lose/Lose people are those who take the attitude, "If I can't win then no one is allowed to." It can happen when someone who is normally Win/Lose finds their winning way blocked and the person becomes determined to "get their own back". "Cutting off your nose to spite your face" would be a good description of this.



## Win

Those that think Win don't necessarily want someone else to win or lose as long as they win. This person will concentrate on securing their own ends – leaving others to secure theirs.

## Win/Win or No Deal

No Deal means that if it is not possible to find a solution that would benefit both parties, we agree to disagree agreeably. No expectations have been created, no performance contracts established. Having No Deal as an option can be liberating as it enables you to walk away without feeling that you have lost. You do not feel the need to keep pushing your own point of view or to manipulate people. You can be open and assertive, holding your own ground without losing face. It can sometimes be better not to deal than to live with a decision that wasn't right for both parties. The No Deal approach is often easier at the beginning of a relationship, later it can be more difficult if you have already created expectations or made compromises that are difficult to go back on.

Achieving Win/Win can be tough. It requires courage and consideration.

*Adapted from: The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People - Stephen Covey*



### Exercise

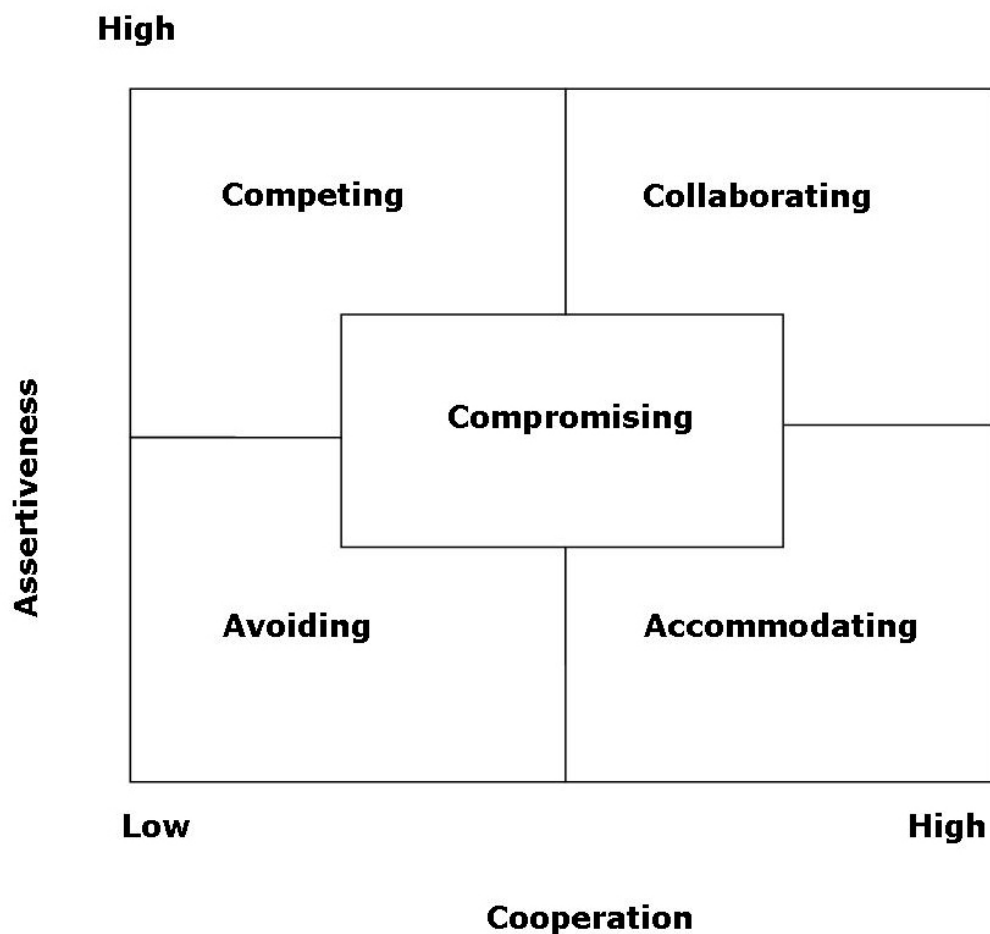
- *Think of as many people as possible that you would classify as Win/Win people.*
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- *What makes them Win/Win people?*

- *Think of situations where you have been able to set up Win/Win results.*
- *List at least three opportunities where you might set up a Win/Win or No Deal solution.*

### Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument

Thomas and Kilmann identified a conflict handling grid with five management styles based on two dimensions: assertiveness and cooperation. In this instance Assertiveness is the level of motivation of the individual to achieve their own goals and objectives, whilst the Cooperation axis is about the willingness of the individual to allow the other party to achieve their goals or objectives.

Any of these conflict resolution styles might be appropriate based on the circumstances of the situation and the people involved.



*Based on Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument*

So the five key styles are ...

- **Avoiding** - Low Cooperation/Low Assertiveness
- **Competing** - Low Cooperation/High Assertiveness
- **Accommodating** - High Cooperation/Low Assertiveness
- **Compromising** - Medium Cooperation/ Medium Assertiveness
- **Collaboration** - High Cooperation/ High Assertiveness

## Avoiding

The Avoiding style is low on both cooperativeness and assertiveness. Usually the original problem is not directly addressed or resolved. There is a sense of "ignore it and it will go away."

It can be useful when an issue is trivial and may burn out of its own accord, or if it is likely to have a very short lifespan. It can also be an option when tackling it in a more assertive way may cause more disruption than it resolves. This strategy can also allow for cooling off periods.

However, avoidance can cause significant problems in the longer term as a long running issue is likely to build up resistance and potential resentment making the level of resistance grow as seen in the volcano example above.

## Competing

The competing style is characterised by high assertiveness and low cooperation with the participant seeking to reach their own preferred outcomes at the expense of other individuals. Very often it incorporates wielding power as a weapon. This approach can be appropriate when quick decisive action is required, such as emergencies. However continued use of this style of resolution is going to create resentment in the longer term. This is similar to the Win-Lose model above.

## Accommodating

The Accommodating style includes a high degree of cooperation. A person using this style will put aside their own goals in favour of the other person's. This behaviour is appropriate when they realise that their needs are less than the other party's or when they realise that they have been in the wrong. However, taken to the extreme this could be a Lose -Win situation.

## Compromising

This style occurs when there are equal levels of cooperation and assertiveness at a moderate level. This can be used where there is a need to find a timely solution, and both parties have similar goals. It can also be used where the outcome has moderate or little impact. It should not be used as a long term solution however, as it frequently masks stronger underlying issues.

## Collaborating

This strategy is high on both the assertiveness and cooperation scales and similar to the Win-Win scenario. Both sides creatively work towards a solution which meets the objectives and goals of all persons involved. Whilst this can create an ideal outcome, it can be a complex and time consuming process to achieve.



*Think of occasions where you have used any of the above styles.  
What happened?*

*If you had used a different style how might the situation turned out differently?*

## Resolving Conflict Questionnaire

*Want to find out your "normal" style when dealing with conflict? Take our fun questionnaire. Read through the following questions and mark the one which you think would most closely match your response. Don't spend too long on each question, just answer as you see fit.*

There is an online version of this questionnaire on [this web page](#).

1. You are faced with an angry customer. Do you ...
  - A. Run away and hide
  - B. Immediately offer them an alternative
  - C. Shout back
  - D. Listen politely and then say sorry there is nothing you can do but you will tell management
  - E. Explain your organisation's policies and then which compensation option would be best for them
2. A member of your team is always running you down. Do you ...
  - A. Accept it as part of the trials of life
  - B. Smile sweetly whilst secretly wishing they would shut up
  - C. Retaliate with snipes of your own
  - D. Ask them to have a go at someone else for a change
  - E. Sit down with them and say "When you say xxx, it makes me feel uncomfortable. Can we agree to differ?"
3. Your partner wants to go to the theatre whereas you would rather go for a meal. Do you ...
  - A. Say "Whatever!"
  - B. Say "OK. Let's do what you want."
  - C. Say "No" and insist you have your way.
  - D. Say "OK. It's your turn to choose."
  - E. Spend 1/2 hour trying to see if you can do both.
4. Your best friend has a new boyfriend/girlfriend who you don't like. They invite you to go with them to the cinema. Do you ...
  - A. Say "No, you're busy that evening." and put the phone down quickly.
  - B. Say "I'd love to!" whilst feeling resentful that you can't spend the time just with your friend.
  - C. Reply "Oh, but I thought we had arranged to go out by ourselves tonight."
  - D. Suggest that you can't go this time, but would love to go with them on another occasion when you can bring another friend as well.
  - E. Ask if you can meet him/her beforehand and then explain your reluctance.

5. Your boss asks you to take on another project, but needs it delivered in a hurry. You have already got more than you can handle and have arranged to go away for the weekend. Do you ...

- A. Say "Yes. Of course." and then worry about how you can fit it all in.
- B. Say "Yes I can do this. I will move some of my other work around to accommodate this."
- C. Say "No, who do you think I am, Hercules? I can't take on any more at the moment."
- D. Say "If I take this on, then I won't be able to do xxx. Which would you prefer."
- E. Say "Yes I can do this. However, I need some help to complete yyy project. Tom is free at the moment, can I ask him to help me?"

Now take your answers and plot them on the chart (or write them alongside the relevant a- e categories) below where...

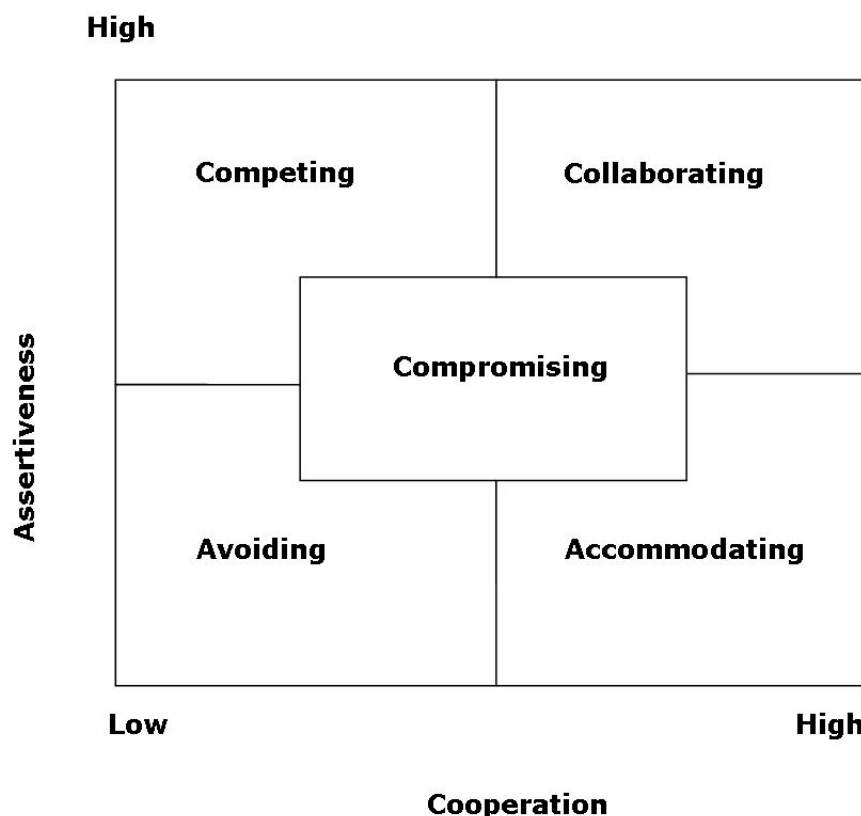
**A** = Avoiding (E.g. if you answered a for Q1 then write 1 in the Avoiding Box)

**B** = Accommodating

**C** = Competing

**D** = Compromising

**E** = Collaborating



Now you should have the 5 questions plotted on the chart. How do they look? Are they all in one corner or are they spread out across the chart? If they are congregating in one box then you should consider ...

**Mostly As:** You tend to avoid problems and conflict. If this is your preferred style you need to start to identify why you avoid issues and what you can do to build your skills to deal with conflict.

First of all you need to improve your assertiveness skills. Check out the section on assertiveness vs. aggression. You need to become more assertive without becoming aggressive as this will cause you to move towards the compete frame.

**Mostly Bs:** You like to accommodate others. You are suppressing your own needs and desires to accommodate others. Think about increasing your assertiveness skills.

**Mostly Cs:** You love competing. But you need to be careful that you aren't so over competitive that you never cooperate. Someone who is always competitive will come across as aggressive and always wanting to Win. Take a step back and see how you can cooperate more often.

**Mostly Ds:** You like to compromise. A great skill in emergencies or when you need to make a quick decision, but be careful you don't sit on the fence too often.

**Mostly Es:** You are a collaborator. A good mix of assertiveness and cooperation. Just make sure that always wanting to get the best answer doesn't slow you down in getting an answer when you need it fast.

**A mix of all of the styles.** A mix of styles suggests that you are open to choosing your response dependent on the circumstances. Using the same style all the time suggests that you lack flexibility. Make sure that you are aware of the different options available to you and are making a conscious choice which style to use on particular occasions.



## The Importance of Rapport and Empathy

In any situation, building rapport and empathy with others is the key to good relationships. This is particularly the case when dealing with conflict.

### Build Rapport

Rapport can be described as when two people feel that they are on the same wavelength. It is one of the fundamental blocks in building and maintaining good relationships. Key behaviours when building rapport include ...

- Genuine listening
- Compatible non-verbal behaviour such as mirroring
- Non-threatening small talk to identify shared experiences
- Appropriate use of the other person's name
- Demonstrating empathy

### Finding Empathy

Empathy is the capacity to recognise and in some respects link to other people's feelings, needs and concerns. By being able to read other people's reactions and emotions it allows you to respond to people's unspoken feelings. Empathic people understand the concerns that lie behind the feelings and to acknowledge those feelings before attempting to solve the problem.

Empathy does not mean sympathy. It is about understanding not necessarily feeling sorry for other people although this can often be the case.

Achieving empathy is about ...

- being open minded to situations
- practising good listening skills
- checking out your assumptions and understanding
- listen for feelings and what's not said

### Dealing with Difficult Behaviour

Conflict behaviour does not usually "just happen". Whilst there may be traps and triggers which can ignite a situation, it is more often the case that behaviour will escalate - as shown in the volcano model above. Catching difficult behaviour before it becomes a conflict situation is both sensible and worthwhile. Here are some thoughts on what you can do you dealing with difficult behaviour before it escalates ...

- Keep calm and keep your temper
- Separate the behaviour from the person in your mind

- Separate the problem from the person. i.e. what you/she “did” rather than what you/she “is”
- Be open to re-assessing the person or the problem - your first assumption may be wrong
- Identify any Trap or Trigger that person may set off
- Understanding what is causing the problem behaviour may help you cope with it - naming the problem is often a help
- Allow others to save face where appropriate
- Assertive behaviour will help in most cases

### Recognise defensive strategies

People tend to have habitual responses to feelings of anxiety and fear e.g.

- Taking charge of the conversation to make the threat go away
- Making jokes to dispel tension or challenges in a conversation or discussion

Recognising these strategies will help you to deal with them appropriately.

### Behaviours to help defuse difficult situations

**Listen:** Listen for the opportunities to let the other person be right/feel heard. Give them a point, let them be right. For example: *"You have every right to feel...."*

**Agree:** Find a particular fact that you can agree on. This doesn't mean that you have to have blanket agreement with everything they say. Acknowledge what they are saying, without compromising your position.

**Pause:** PAUSE before you continue. Give time for your agreement to be heard. "Let it land." This can help calm situations down. Without the key pause people may miss the fact that you agreed and react negatively.

### Dealing with Disruptive Behaviour

Disruptive behaviour can upset not only those involved, but also those around them. Managing disruptive behaviour in a positive way is more likely to be productive than to attempt to squash it. You should be careful never to reward disruptive behaviour as this will just encourage the person engaged in this way to continue behaving inappropriately.

Using the DEAL model can help to achieve a positive result.

**D – Description** – Describe the behaviour – “I need to point out that every time you xxx you interrupt me, which slows things down.”

**E – Explanation** – Explain the effects of the behaviour – “This makes it difficult to continue and it will take even longer to cover the issues that I need to cover.”

**A – Action required** – Spell out the action needed to correct the behaviour –  
“Please do not interrupt me. Allow me to finish what I am saying. I will pay you the same courtesy.”

**L – Likely consequences** – Spell out what will happen if the request does not occur – “If you persist in this behaviour I will have no option but to ...”

**Ignore, Ignore, Respond** - Ignore the behaviour twice, but pick up on it the third time. Repeat this sequence using DEAL to help you.

## Responding to resistance

In a conflict situation, resistance may be a tactic adopted by someone who is unhappy or wants to make a grievance known. It is easy to get frustrated with someone who is resisting in some way, whether it is by ignoring you or shouting the odds, and allow your frustration to make you react in a less than helpful way. Consider these tips for dealing with resistance ...

- **Do not be stampeded** – do not rush to respond, slow down your breathing, pause and listen
- **Denials** – if they are continually denying something which is against known facts – check your details before continuing
- **Answering a question with a question** – If they do this treat it as rhetorical. Pause. Restate the question
- **Changing the topic** – Bring the person back to your question and deal with that first. You might reply "that is an interesting point, however I would like to deal with this first."
- **Passing the buck** – i.e. "don't ask me - ask them". Your reply might be: "I will ask that person another time, but first I want to hear what you have to say."
- **Arguing** – ignore it. Wait for the person to stop talking, or wait for a suitable pause and continue.

*Adapted from: Investigative Interviewing. The Conversation Management Approach Eric Shepherd*

The exercise on the following page will help you to think through how you might have used the DEAL model.



*Thinking of a situation where you had to deal with difficult or disruptive behaviour, how might the DEAL model have helped?*

*What might you have done differently when responding to resistance based on the suggestions above?*

## Dealing with emotion

Dealing with individuals that are emotional can be both complex and rewarding. Helping someone through an emotional patch can give you a great sense of self worth and esteem. However, it can also be draining and exhausting. Being prepared for emotional situations can help you to both manage the situation and your own reaction.



*Consider your work environment. In what circumstances might you expect to need to deal with someone in an emotional state?*

*What else can trigger emotional responses?*

*In your experience, what has worked when dealing with an emotional situation?*

*What action has (or might have) made the situation worse?*

When dealing with emotion, you might want to consider the following ...

- Detect it as early as possible – if you sense it arising use reflection to step back – “Shall we take a step back?” “I can sense you are feeling unhappy about...Why is that?”
- Don't allow the emotion to infect you – if the person raises their voice, lower yours.
- When emotion breaks through – allow the person to express their emotion while you listen and then allow them to compose themselves again. Expressing strong emotions is tiring and the individual will become more subdued if allowed to let off steam.

If you are in a situation where emotion is likely to be an issue, it is always worthwhile having a box of tissues handy. Simply handing someone a tissue can be a great way to show empathy.

### **Be Prepared for Emotion - Susie's Story**

*Susie is a primary school teacher who on occasions has to deal with difficult situations with the parents of the children in her class.*

*When children are moved from reception to year 1 in this school they are split from one group into 2 classes. Inevitably this means that sometimes friends have to be split up. Parents are told by having a list posted outside the classroom as to which class their children will be in and which teacher they will have next year.*

*All parents are different, but most want the best for their children and want to see them succeed. In this instance Abigail, mother of 2 children at the school, was upset that her youngest child would be going into a class with a teacher she didn't rate. She was concerned that Joseph, her son would not be encouraged to read to the level she felt was appropriate. The older child had already had this teacher and Abigail was not impressed.*

*Having read the list that had been posted, Abigail burst into tears in front of the other parents. Susie took her into the classroom so that they could talk privately.*

*She talked through the reasons why Joseph had ended up in the class that he had and how it was not always easy to accommodate individual parents requests as there were a number of balancing issues that had to be taken into account when deciding on class make up and sizes.*

*Abigail was very upset and her emotion was expressed through violent floods of tears. Susie was affected by these emotions and wanted to comfort and*

*reassure, but equally had to maintain a professional distance and support her colleague.*

*Ultimately, Susie persuaded Abigail that she would take responsibility to talk directly to the new class teacher and explain to her that Abigail was concerned about Joseph's reading and ask her to ensure that he was properly supported.*

*She also suggested that if Abigail still had concerns that she should address the Head Teacher (which she ultimately did).*

*Abigail was sufficiently reassured to be able to recover her composure and move forward.*

*Emotions can strike at unexpected times. If they do be prepared to listen and let the initial emotions pass before trying to discuss the situation.*

On the next page we will look at how to deal with Anger.

## Dealing with Anger



- *What makes you really angry?*
- *What calms you down?*
- *Give an example of a time where the way you coped with the situation was destructive*
- *Give an example of a time where the way you coped was constructive.*



It is important to be aware of what makes us angry and to think about ways of dealing with this. Never smile when a person gets angry – it provokes more anger. Think relaxed.

The question and answer session below addresses some of the issues around what happens when people get angry. See how much you recognise in yourself and in others.

## The Anger Interview

*Based on an interview with a Clinical Psychologist*

**Q:** *How would you describe anger? What's happening when people get angry?*

**A:** Anger is one of the most basic of all our emotions and it's an outlet for situations that occur that upset us or are controversial or cause conflict. It's often a feeling that rises up in you and you want to open your mouth and you want to protest maybe or defend yourself. It's a very normal thing and we all experience it at some time. I think problems arise when we are not able to express it.

**Q:** *What's happening when people get angry?*

**A:** Anger originates in the amygdala, the so-called emotional part of your brain. As you become angry your body's muscles tense up. Inside your brain, neurotransmitter chemicals known as catecholamines are released causing you to experience a burst of energy lasting up to several minutes.

At the same time your heart rate accelerates, your blood pressure rises, and your rate of breathing increases. Your face may flush as increased blood flow enters your limbs and extremities in preparation for physical action. Your attention narrows and becomes locked onto the target of your anger. Soon you can pay attention to nothing else. You're now ready to fight.

Anger can significantly decrease your ability to concentrate. This is why it is difficult to remember details of really explosive arguments.

It is difficult to relax from an angry state. The adrenaline-caused arousal that occurs during anger lasts a very long time (many hours, sometimes days), and lowers our anger threshold, making it easier for us to get angry again later on. Though we do calm down, it takes a very long time for us to return to our resting state.

**Q:** *What are the main causes of people getting angry?*

**A:** You may want somebody to do something and they refuse to do it, or you may see something like a motorist not obeying the road signs and you get this rage. People get frustrated, either the person in front of them is not moving as quickly as they would like or they perhaps stop without any warning. All those kind of things.

Then the little things that irritate you, perhaps if you are in a good mood, you just feel, I am feeling a bit irritated, but never mind. But, if you are in a mood and you are already feeling pretty down and several things may have already gone wrong in your day, then you're liable to break out into perhaps aggressive or abusive behaviour.

**Q:** *So can Anger be a manifestation of other things that are going on in your life?*

**A:** Very much so. I think that one of the most common ways is that the little day to day irritations that we all experience, for some of us we don't express any anger or any irritation because we think we won't talk to our colleague about that, it's such a small thing, I'll just keep it to myself. And then several other things happen and you're still saying to yourself, I won't talk about that because they will just think I'm being silly and it builds up, like layer upon layer and then one day somebody will do something that is absolutely minor and you will explode at them.

**Q:** *It's a bit like a pressure cooker?*

**A:** It is very much so. The analogy of a kettle is useful here. You fill the kettle up and you start to boil it and the steam comes out of the top and it goes on merrily for hours on end. If you block up all the holes where the steam comes out, the kettle will explode when it gets to a certain temperature.

**Q:** *So different people are going to experience this in different ways for different reasons?*

**A:** Definitely, yes. The healthiest people are able to express their anger when they feel it. There are times, for all of us when it's not appropriate to express our anger, but I would say then that as soon as you can afterwards you need to find a way to offload it.

**Q:** *What are the signs of someone else feeling this? Can you see it hatching before it explodes?*

**A:** As we've already established, we all have different triggers and different ways of expressing ourselves. Common signs are when someone starts to make a noise. Like bang a few doors or thumping on the desk, being very short tempered with people. You might say to them "What's the matter?" and they reply "Nothing, nothing!" and just look the other way or walk out of the room. That's a good sign that there is something wrong, but for some reason they don't want to admit it or tell you what.

**Q:** *What can you do about it for yourself?*

**A:** Well, I think it's very important to find an outlet. Strong physical exercise can be helpful. One of the most useful, I would say, of tools for anger is, you know those little boxing balls that you can have that's a bit like a netball net, that you can put on the inside of the door. So when something really gets you mad, you can go in there and have a good box. Failing that, beating up cushions, or pillows, or even screaming into a cushion, because it can't be heard outside of the room and there's a wonderful release, to have a good scream.

**Q:** *What about dealing with other people's anger?*

**A:** First of all it is important to **recognise that people have the right to be angry**, particularly if that anger is justified. Using phrases such as: "You have every right to feel angry, now let us see what we can do to sort things out." can be helpful. By justifying someone's right to feel angry, you are recognising their upset. However, by then offering to consider options to resolve the issue it gives you and them an opportunity to move forward and away from the initial cause of the anger. Anger can often trap people into a looped way of thinking. Giving them an opportunity to get out of the loop will give them a positive outlook to concentrate on.

Secondly, **try to find some common ground**, however tenuous, and try to build on it. This will not only make a resolution more likely, but will help avoid further conflicts from the same source.

Thirdly, **remain in Adult and remain Assertive**. By keeping control of your own behaviour, you are likely to draw others into a more reasonable behaviour. Adult and Assertive behaviour will breed Adult and Assertive behaviour as a result.

Fourthly, **keep your voice calm**. You may not feel it, but the calmer you are the more likely you are to pass that feeling on to the person who is angry.



*How many of the issues discussed above did you recognise? When have you used any of these techniques in the past and how helpful were they?*

## **Defusing Anger - Alan's story**

*Alan is a fire safety officer. He was informed of a set of premises that were recommended for a visit by a member of the local council. Alan rang to make an appointment with Jack the manager and was met with a very defensive and non-cooperative response. Alan sensed that his own voice was beginning to rise as a reaction to the verbal abuse that he was receiving.*

*Alan took a decision to go back to the beginning and explain why he had to carry out the visit and explain that he had the right to visit to check that the premises were safe for people working there. He kept his voice level and calm and repeated himself whenever necessary. Eventually he managed to calm Jack down and get agreement that the premises should offer a safe working environment and to make the appointment.*

*When he arrived on the premises, he made a point of visiting Jack first before making his inspection and had no further problems in dealing with the situation.*

## Chapter 6

### When Conflict Management Doesn't Work

We have looked at the way we communicate with others and how this can influence their behaviour and help to defuse a conflict situation. Transactional analysis showed us how our ego state can affect what we are trying to say, and we have considered the factors that can cause a breakdown in communication.

We have also looked at impact of traps and triggers and how they might spark unexpected emotions and reactions. We have also reviewed the difference between assertiveness and aggressiveness.

All of these different models of behaviour and tools of management are there to help to both prevent conflict arising, or to find ways to defuse conflict once it appears.

Whilst dealing with other people, we must be continually alert to what is going on around us. A situation can change very rapidly. A simple strategy for coping with conflict situations includes the following actions...

- **Be aware, Be alert; constantly observe what is going on around you.**
- **Assess and Acknowledge that situations can change rapidly and will call for regular assessment.**
- **Plan and Prepare for unforeseen circumstances.**

We recognise that there will be some situations that we will not be able to resolve and that there may be times when the other person's behaviour may become threatening, abusive or even violent. Indeed, there are some circumstances where conflict can happen very quickly and you need to take decisive action immediately.

When responding to these challenges, our first consideration should be our own safety and, in doing so, we have to decide between '**Flight**' and '**Fight**'.

#### Flight or fight

The 'flight or fight' response is the body's natural reaction to a potentially dangerous situation. As discussed above, when we get angry our brain produces chemicals to get ready to fight. Similarly, our brain has an in-built system for preparing the body when threatened, readying it for running away or fighting.

This response to anything that is perceived as a threat or potential threat begins in certain primitive parts of the brain, which send a message to the adrenal glands. These begin a process which releases a number of hormones, including adrenaline, whose purpose is to prepare the body for vigorous emergency action.

### Flight

**Flight** should be your preferred option, and is the safer. Never stay in a situation in which you feel uncomfortable; remember, even if your job role means that you work with a 'duty of care', this duty of care starts with you.

If **flight** is not possible, compliance might be the safer option. Remember, property is not worth being physically attacked for. When it comes to **physical attack**, always leave a 'way out' wherever possible.

### Fight

Unfortunately, **fight** might be the only viable option. If it is, you should be aware of the limitations and legal requirements. See the section below on the laws that are relevant if you have to protect yourself physically.

### When not reacting can help reduce the heat - Robbie's Story

*Robbie was in charge of a fire engine which was called out to a car fire which had been set alight deliberately. A gang of youths were gathered about 50 metres away, jeering and calling out.*

*Whilst the fire crew got on with the task of putting out the fire, the youths started to collect stones and throw them at the crew.*

*Robbie had two alternatives. Stand up to the youths and try to push them back, or to take defensive action and ensure that all of the crew were kept safe, but not challenging the youths directly.*

*Robbie decided to take the latter course. He made sure all of the crew were aware of the threat and that they were all either out of range or protected by the engine and did not react to the youths.*

*They eventually gave up trying to taunt the crew and moved away. As a result of the non-aggressive response they had no further incidents on that estate for a number of years.*

## Overcoming Fear

Fear is a stress response based on the fight or flight reflex. However, in many situations, unless you are under immediate threat, you will have time to assess the situation and make a choice. Having the choice as to how to react, both to the situation in hand and your sense of fear can make you feel more powerful and more in control.



*Thinking about the difficult situation(s) that you might find yourself in, what might make you fearful?*

*What makes you believe that this situation is dangerous?*

*Can you identify the specific dangers?*

*What might you do to manage your fear, real or imagined?*



Here are a few pointers to managing your own fear in a situation, both for immediate dangers and for occasions where there is more time to consider the situation.

**Breathe slowly.** Take a deep breath and centre yourself. Breathing can anchor you in the here and now and will help you to concentrate on the situation.

**WTWTCH.** What's the worst that could happen? If someone is hurling abuse at you it may hurt your feelings but you are still OK physically.

**Risk.** Carry out a risk assessment. Check your distance, check your escape route, check for warning signs in the other person.

**Get specific.** What are you actually afraid of? Have you created a negative picture in your head which may never happen? What is the flip side of this?

**What's missing?** What are you lacking right now? It might be back up from another person or simply more information to be able to answer a question.

**Talk.** Afraid of how others might react? Try it out on someone else first (even if it is only the dog!) Talking out loud can help put things in perspective.

**Write it down.** This can't be done on the spur of the moment, but if you can plan what you want to say in advance it can really help. Have some handy phrases ready. If you regularly work in an environment where you need to respond quickly then it is worth spending a bit of time brainstorming with your colleagues some appropriate phrases. Knowing what you are going to say and do leaves you feeling much more in control.

## Common law

Common law recognises that there are many circumstances in which one person may use force upon another without committing a crime (e.g. sporting contests). Included in common law is a person's right to protect themselves from attack and to act in the defence of others.

If no more force is used than is reasonable to repel the attack, such force is not unlawful and no crime is committed. Furthermore, a person about to be attacked does not have to wait for his or her assailant to strike the first blow.

Certain circumstances may justify you making the first strike.

These laws are interpreted according to the following guidelines ...

- minimum use of force
- proportionality of force used
- seriousness of evil to be prevented
- right of self defence.

## Section 3, Criminal Law Act 1967

***'A person may use such force as is reasonable in the circumstances in the prevention of crime, or in effecting or assisting in the lawful arrest of offenders or suspected offenders or persons unlawfully at large.'***

The key word in this legislation is '*reasonable*' and the issue of reasonableness is a question of fact to be decided in each individual case.

***Remember: going too far is a criminal offence!***

## Other Options

### Mediation

If the conflict is not so immediate and physical then it may be appropriate to use mediation. Mediation can be particularly effective in organisational situations where members of the HR team or external mediators are brought in to resolve conflicts within or between teams. Mediation has seen a large rise in popularity over the last few years.

**Conflict Coaching** is also used in some organisations where managers are looking for guidance on managing difficult situations and conversations. The coach will guide the manager through situations and get them to think through what they might say and what possible responses might be. This works well when combined with role play experiences.

## Chapter 7

### Conclusion

We have looked at a wide range of situations in which resolving conflict can be necessary. Whether it is with customers, patients, students or colleagues, resolving conflict can have many underlying factors.

Here are 16 things to consider when resolving conflict ...

1. Don't take the bait.
2. Consider the underlying causes. Is it obvious why someone is upset?
3. Pause before you react. This will give you thinking time.
4. Check your own behaviour. Is it part of the problem?
5. Listen.
6. Acknowledge that they may be correct in part of their concern.
7. Be willing to negotiate if appropriate.
8. Remain assertive.
9. Stay in adult mode
10. Look for warning and danger signs.
11. Check your distances.
12. Avoid competing.
13. Think Win/Win.
14. Be prepared to deal with emotion and anger.
15. Be aware, be alert.
16. Know your legal position.

Resolving conflict is never easy. We hope that the tools and techniques in this Useful Guide will help you understand what is happening and allow you to take control of any situation that might arise.

## **Bibliography and Acknowledgements**

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## **Feedback**

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If we use your feedback to improve A Useful Guide to Resolving Conflict we will email you a copy of the updated version.

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## About the Author

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Berry Winter, author of [A Useful Guide to Create a New You](#), [A Useful Guide to De-Stress You](#) and co-author of [A Useful Guide to Dealing with Difficult Behaviour](#), has extensive knowledge in creating learning and development programmes.

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Berry specialises in providing performance training and coaching for people in business. She runs courses in areas such as ...

- Interpersonal Skills
- Communication Skills
- Team Building
- Leadership
- Change Management
- Customer Care
- Presentation Skills

Berry also provides 1:1 coaching at all levels of business. Working 1:1 gives much greater flexibility to meet the development needs of individuals and can increase their effectiveness dramatically in a short space of time.

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