



# Understand your **spontaneous reactions to conflict** to manage them better

**W**hen a conflict emerges, the various players adopt an attitude they feel will support their respective priorities. In doing so, a scene is set in which the protagonists may become completely immersed, or conversely stay aloof. The ability to **keep a clear head in tense situations enables us to choose the most effective role**, rather than blindly obey the impulses dictated by our personality.

Indeed, our spontaneous reaction towards conflict depends mainly on our personal history and preferences, which may be at odds with the requirements of the situation. Three factors in particular come into play:

## How we experience conflict

For some people, conflict is a **natural component** of working in a company. They face it with passion, determination or resignation, but do not particularly challenge the concept of conflict itself. *“Conflict is an opportunity to demonstrate my qualities as a leader and negotiator; it’s part of my job,”* explains one executive. *“In fact, I rather enjoy it because it’s a chance to debate and integrate different points of view.”* For others, conversely, conflict is **perceived as negative**. *“Regular conflicts are inevitable. But I’m more comfortable*

The role we adopt in a conflict must be a deliberate choice, not a spontaneous reaction.

*when a solution can be found that makes everyone happy,”* states another member of the same management committee. So, while some people dive actively into conflict, others prefer to avoid it or do everything they can to end it as quickly as possible.

## Our natural attitude toward others

Some people tend to see conflict as a **battle that must be won at all costs**. Being persuasive, defending their position, garnering support is thus the objective for them, conscious or not. They start from the principle that their opinion is as valid as anyone else’s, if not moreso. Others spontaneously consider conflict as a **problem to be solved**. Careful to integrate divergent perspectives, anxious to be appreciated for

their concern for others and recognized for their objectivity, they naturally start by listening, comparing, seeking areas of agreement, etc. The first group of people manage to defend their ideas, but may sometimes impose them on others to the detriment of the quality of the relationship or the decision. The second group of people are generally perceived to be constructive, but may be trapped by inextricable dilemmas or lose sight of their own interests in the process.

## Our level of involvement

Some people tend to **throw themselves** body and soul into defending their views. They willingly undertake crusades and may be highly passionate or even intransigent. Others are naturally **detached**; they thus appear more objective and steady, but may also seem flighty or nonchalant.

Each approach has its advantages and disadvantages. Being aware of our natural tendencies gives us the ability to choose different approaches deliberately, depending on the needs of the situation.

Learn which of the five following attitudes to adopt, depending on the circumstances.

- 1 **Assert yourself** with determination
- 2 **Balance** discussion by focusing on the facts
- 3 **Negotiate** acceptable compromises
- 4 **Align with** other points of view
- 5 **Pacify** relations between stakeholders

## 1<sup>st</sup> attitude

### Assert yourself with determination

Far from seeing conflict as a problem in itself, some people consider it as an **inevitable component of teamwork, in which individuals must defend their respective viewpoints**. They thus defend their position without beating around the bush and expect others to do the same, to avoid wasting time in making decisions. They see conflict as a confrontation in which the best person naturally wins.

This attitude has the merit of **rapidly raising thorny questions**, and keeping them from degenerating. It is also helpful in asserting a clear line of conduct that reassures others that their interests will be well defended. In emergency situations, **progress can be made rapidly**, without hesitation and delay. The ability of determined people to confront difficult situations often attracts the ad-

Determined, you consider conflict as an inevitable phase to be managed firmly.

miration of those around them. What is more, because they tackle conflict naturally, they find it relatively easy to move forward on a sound basis without resentment afterwards.

The risk is that determined people often try to force others to accept their position. They may thus **make decisions unilaterally**, leaving subordinates or colleagues feeling uninvolved for lack of the possibility to express their opinions. Relationships may also be jeopardized by this attitude, which may be perceived as uncaring, inflexible or tactless, particularly by those who fear conflict. Finally, approaching conflict as a power struggle often stifles creativity; more creative solutions can frequently be found through deeper constructive discussion.

## Helpful hints

- **Force yourself to listen.** Take pause before you express your views, especially if you are convinced you are right!
- **Be careful how you state your ideas.** Try to pose the problem in a way that leaves room for the expression of different viewpoints.
- **Learn to make concessions.** You will be all the more credible when you defend your own interests.
- **If possible, don't force people to accept your decisions.** The effort devoted to finding a better solution often saves time after the conflict is over.

*"What we take for peace is merely an armistice between conflicts."*

Jean Cocteau

## 2<sup>nd</sup> attitude

### Balance discussion by focusing on the facts

For some, **conflict reveals the existence of problems that can only be resolved by constructively combining different viewpoints**. Their first reflex will thus be to take the heat out of the discussion to avoid personal quarrels and focus on the facts. For them, it is possible to find a lasting solution only by taking account of all constraints.

Anxious to understand all the facets of a problem, balanced people take time to listen carefully to the various perspectives. They can **maintain a certain degree of objectivity**, even when they are stakeholders. This objective and analytical approach has the virtue of minimizing the risk of interpersonal conflicts and trench warfare and therefore supports the quality of relationships. Moreover, the desire to

Balanced, you regard the conflict as a problem to be analyzed.

explore the problem facilitates participation by those who hesitate to spontaneously express their views. This makes it easier to **seek solutions acceptable to everyone** and hence more durable.

This analytical and systematic attitude may nonetheless lead to a **dead end** when antagonistic interests cannot be reconciled. It may also be particularly unsuitable in emergency situations, when there is no time to explore the various opinions and options in great depth. Moreover, **time may be lost** on questions that are hardly worth the effort, out of a concern to weigh all of the ins and outs. Finally, people with a balanced attitude may have trouble understanding the reactions of their more impassioned or aggressive counterparts.

## Helpful hints

- Try to calibrate your efforts according to the stakes. All conflicts do not deserve to be analyzed in the same depth.
- **Learn when to stop analyzing a problem.** This is just one step that should lead to the definition of a solution.
- **Learn to make decisions without necessarily consulting everyone involved.** The situation may sometimes require a quicker decision.
- **Don't neglect the emotional side of discussions.** This information source may be as valuable as factual data.

### 3<sup>rd</sup> attitude

## Negotiate acceptable compromises

The natural consequence of the clash of divergent interests, conflict **never produces a completely satisfactory solution**, according to some. Each party must thus give a little to find an acceptable outcome. People with this attitude want to find a good compromise and expect as much from the other stakeholders.

This ability to consider the situation objectively and take account of the constraints of others greatly facilitates interactions. It fosters the emergence of a **cooperative** climate, making it easier to resolve conflicts rapidly. Moreover, approaching conflict through negotiation helps to end stalemates that can arise when solving

Pragmatic, you rely on mutual concessions to find a solution to conflicts.

complex problems. Since negotiators do not attempt to reconcile the irreconcilable, they don't expect anyone to find a perfect solution. This makes it easier for the stakeholders to modify their perspective, especially since the negotiator recognizes the value of mutual concessions.

In seeking an intermediate solution, pragmatic people may nonetheless fail to see an **alternative win-win solution**. Such solutions are certainly more difficult to find, but far more beneficial to all concerned. In addition, people may all too quickly reach an end result that looks acceptable, but which has not addressed the root causes of the conflict, which then rapidly re-emerges.

### Helpful Hints

- **Don't simply seek the best compromise.** It is sometimes preferable to make the pie bigger, rather than find the best way to divide it up.
- **Take the time to explore the root causes of the problem.** It is pointless to find a compromise only for the conflict to recur shortly thereafter
- **Put the stakes into perspective.** The objective is not just to put an end to the conflict, but to find the most satisfactory solution over time.

## Five spontaneous attitudes toward conflict

Identifying your natural attitude and understanding its limitations is extremely helpful in adapting effectively to the circumstances of the situation.

Determined (DECISION)	Balanced (ANALYSIS)	Pragmatic (COMPROMISE)	Conciliatory (CONCESSION)	Peacemaker (MEDIATION)
Firm Proactive Decisive Urgent	Objective Analytical Factual Reasonable	Negotiator Patient Diplomatic Balanced	Prudent Good listener Accommodating Understanding	Attentive Skillful Unifying Pacifying

### 4<sup>th</sup> attitude

## Align with various points of view

Some people experience **conflict as putting their relationships to the test**. They try to avoid creating resentment that could sustainably harm relationships. Careful to be accommodating, they demonstrate many signs of good will and easily take the side of other stakeholders.

The advantage of this approach is that it **makes it easier to end the conflict** by preserving **trust**. Taking account of repercussions on others, being able to give in when the stakes are not important, and compensating progress on one side with a reciprocal concession are gestures that foster positive momentum. Conciliatory people tend to place the

Conciliatory, you try to find the middle ground.

common good before their personal interests, a quality that is highly appreciated. Their good will thus facilitates the **implementation** of decisions, because others know their opinions have been taken into consideration.

Often prompt to align with the viewpoint of their counterparts, conciliatory people may **fail to raise issues** that need to be addressed. Their aversion to impose their decisions may also make them **appear weak** or even inconsistent when they take sides with the last one who speaks. They are also often at a loss when conflicts cannot be managed without upsetting one of the parties.

### Helpful Hints

- **Don't hesitate to be more assertive.** Force of conviction also inspires respect.
- **Don't give in too quickly!** Learn to set the limits of your goodwill and turn your concessions into a negotiation point to defend your own interests in turn.
- **Give your ideas the credit they deserve.** Sharing and defending them will enrich the discussion and help everyone find better solutions.
- **Look at the positive side of conflict.** Conflict can be a sign of trust when people feel free to express their disagreement.

## 5<sup>th</sup> attitude

### Pacify relations between stakeholders

#### Helpful Hints

- **Accept that conflict may sometimes be necessary.** Conflict allows people to express different points of view and should not be seen as bad in and of itself.
- **Don't forget to defend your own ideas,** while listening to others to identify amiable solutions if possible.
- **Know when to listen and when to make decisions.** Otherwise, you may spin your wheels exploring the various perspectives without ever finding a solution to the problem.
- **Be courageous in cutting through recurrent conflicts.** It is sometimes better to let a conflict come to a head than to let it fester and repeatedly recur.

For some people, conflict **is often destructive**, and should thus be avoided if possible. These people deploy diplomatic qualities to convince the stakeholders to defuse the problem.

Acting as **safety valves**, peacemakers protect those around them from suffering needless tension and often keep the situation from degenerating. Through their ability to listen, moderate and put things into perspective, they reassure others and help them focus on **more productive discussions**. Concerned with harmony, they can easily step back if someone else is better positioned to find a relevant solution.

Peacemakers must nonetheless be wary of their desire to avoid conflict, because in their haste to nip discord in the bud, they may **prevent disagree-**

**ments from being expressed** and thus allow problems to fester. Although they may stay in the background in the name of the common good, they must be careful to preserve their image, to avoid seeming **irresolute** or reluctant to shoulder their responsibilities.

Because they are eager to demonstrate that the viewpoints of all stakeholders are legitimate, they may appear to change their opinion

at the drop of a hat, and may end up losing the trust of those around them. Finally, the concern of peacemakers to pacify tense situations may make them overreact or get upset if a conflict arises despite their efforts to avoid it. They may then find it difficult to turn the page and rebuild relationships on a sounder basis.

A peacemaker, you use your diplomatic mediation skills to avoid needless conflict.

#### Understand others

Learn to manage people who do not have the same spontaneous attitude as you when dealing with conflict.

WITH A Determined counterpart	WITH A Balanced counterpart	WITH A Pragmatic counterpart	WITH A Conciliatory counterpart	WITH A Peacemaker
Clarify the points on which you will not make concessions to avoid giving in to the pressure you may sometimes feel coming from the determined counterpart.	Give the balanced counterpart background and details to understand why you disagree.	Take the time to identify up front acceptable concessions and the points on which you do not want to yield.	Reassure the conciliatory counterpart that the conflict does not jeopardize your relationship, even if you do not always agree.	Do not hesitate to consult the peacemaker. Attentive to the least tension, he or she can indicate potential sources of problems in the team.
Clarify the concessions you are willing to make and don't hesitate to underline the cost to you, in order to encourage the determined counterpart to respond in kind.	Clearly tell the balanced counterpart when you agree with a proposed solution, to save him or her the trouble of pursuing the analysis unnecessarily.	Point out the concessions you have made to show your desire to collaborate.	Show the conciliatory counterpart that you are interested in his or her opinion. Specify what you expect from him or her: a critical perspective, specific expertise, etc.	Agree to collaborate in searching for a conflict-free solution. You can always tackle the "real problems" later. If this approach fails.
Help expand the determined counterpart's vision of the problem to encourage him or her to take the interests of others into account.	Alert the balanced counterpart of emotional stakes of the conflict that he or she may not always perceive spontaneously.	Incite the pragmatic counterpart to expand his or her analysis; the situation at hand might be just a symptom of a bigger problem.	Try to gain the trust of the conciliatory counterpart to encourage the expression of his or her point of view, even if it is different from yours.	Help the peacemaker take a stand, by asking questions, reformulating his or her remarks, etc.
Remind the determined counterpart that everyone does not handle pressure the same way, and encourage him or her to take this into account.	Rely on the objectivity of the balanced counterpart to help you manage your own emotions and take the heat out of the debate.	Help the pragmatic counterpart imagine creative solutions, for example, by combining initial suggestions.	Do not hesitate to rely on the conciliatory counterpart to garner the support of the other stakeholders; his or her good listening skills can facilitate interactions.	Reassure the peacemaker that conflict is not necessarily destructive and can even be constructive.