

# MANAGING CONFLICTS

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**S**uccess is a very desirable thing. Victory, achievement and winning have always motivated the human race. When we examine our achievements in life, whatever they may be, we often recognise missing elements. It is not easy to pin-point this "lack of fulfilment". Successes do not fill every moment of life. Life is full of disappointments, frustrations, failures and emptiness. And this is the point of conflict—*when what we get in life does not match up to what we thought we wanted.*

Let us trace the nature of conflict and how Malaysians manage conflict.

Our lives are not dependent on whether or not we have conflicts. It is how we handle conflicts that makes the difference. Although conflicts are still there, it is our attitude towards conflicts that can be totally different. Frustration can be turned into fascination and upset into growth.

## Types of Conflict

Conflict is everywhere - in our personal lives at home, at work, between men and women, religion against religion, nation against nation and even between drivers on a busy road during the peak afternoon traffic.

The positive aspect of conflict is that it calls attention to existing problems and results in the resolution of problems. It increases our energy and stimulates interest. There is a tremendous amount of cohesiveness and individual growth. However, the negative aspect of conflict is also quite serious. Attention gets diverted away from work goals. Victory in the conflict becomes more important than working effectively. The feelings of frustration, stress and hostility lowers the people's morale and reinforces poor self-

concept. Dr. Peter Drucker stressed the importance of anonymity during group interaction by saying, "It is not who is right but what is right." Conflicts can distract communication and lead to polarisation among groups. If conflicts are not managed successfully, productivity and performance of the people are bound to suffer.

Through a series of misperception, man has perpetuated some myths that are very detrimental to the successful resolution of conflicts. One of the myths is the idea that conflict by itself is negative. Nature doesn't see conflicts as negative. Nature uses conflicts as a primary motivation for change. Unfortunately people see conflicts as something bad and harmful.

Equating conflict with contest is another myth perpetuated for centuries. We are the ones who choose whether to make it a contest, a game in which there are winners and losers. Why can't there be a win-win situation? Valuing ourselves and others will go a long way in establishing win-win relationships. Why do most of us push ourselves so mercilessly in contests that we have created out of our imagined need to be right? What we should do is to take things more easily, as this will enable us to reach an appropriate solution to the conflict faster. To quote international diving champion Greg Lugano, "At the diving nationals, I tasted second place for the first time in a long while. But second place isn't losing if I learn something from a competition, I can be second to last and still come out a winner."

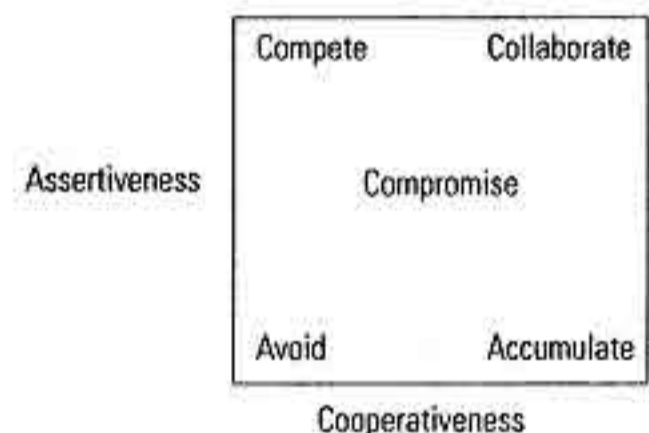
## Causes of Conflicts

Conflicts can be basically traced to five issues:

- *Value differences*  
We have different urgencies and priorities than our associates.
- *Role pressures*  
We must win because our role demands it.
- *Perceptual differences*  
We view situations very differently.
- *Divergent goals*  
We may work for the same company but have different goals.
- *Status threat*  
One may have a good ideas but his self-esteem may insist that he must be the one having all the good ideas.

## Response styles

A test was done by this author on 500 Malaysian executives to assess their behaviour in conflict situations based on 2 basic dimensions, namely assertiveness and cooperativeness. These two basic dimensions of behaviour can be used to define 5 specific methods of dealing with conflicts. These five methods are as follows:



The results revealed very strong cultural influences on managerial practices in Malaysian. Nearly 80% of those who participated in the tests had very high scores for avoidance and very low scores for competing.

This was hardly surprising because of the strong influence of cultural factors on Malaysian executives. When the test was done on a group comprising 50 couples, a similar trend in managing conflicts was observed.

In conclusion, it is very important for us to manage and resolve conflicts if we want to improve the productivity and performance of our employees.