

LO10-4 Outline the five conflict-handling styles and discuss the circumstances in which each would be most appropriate.

INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT-HANDLING STYLES

The six sources of conflict lead to conflict perceptions and emotions that, in turn, motivate people to respond in some way to the conflict. More than 70 years ago, organizational behavior pioneer Mary Parker Follett observed that people respond to perceived and felt conflict through various conflict-handling strategies. Follett's original list was expanded and refined over the years into the five-category model shown in [Exhibit 10.3](#). This model recognizes that how people respond behaviorally to a conflict situation depends on the relative importance they place on maximizing outcomes for themselves and for the other party.³⁶



Exhibit 10.3 Interpersonal Conflict-Handling Styles

Source: C. K. W. de Dreu, A. Evers, B. Beersma, E. S. Kluwer and A. Nauta, "A Theory-Based Measure of Conflict Management Strategies in the Workplace," *Journal of Organizational Behavior* 22 (2001): 645–68. Reprinted with permission of John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

"People who use the forcing style typically have a win-lose orientation—they believe the parties are drawing from a fixed pie, so the more one party receives, the less the other party will receive."

- *Problem solving.* Problem solving tries to find a solution that is beneficial for both parties. This is known as the **win-win orientation** because people using this style believe the resources at stake are expandable rather than fixed if the parties work together to find a creative solution. Information sharing is an important feature of this style because both parties collaborate to identify common ground and potential solutions that satisfy everyone involved.
- *Forcing.* Forcing tries to win the conflict at the other's expense. People who use this style typically have a **win-lose orientation**—they believe the parties are drawing from a fixed pie, so the more one party receives, the less the other party will receive. Consequently, this style relies on assertiveness and other hard influence tactics (see Chapter 9) to get one's own way.
- *Avoiding.* Avoiding tries to smooth over or evade conflict situations altogether. A common avoidance strategy is to steer clear of the coworkers associated with the conflict. A second avoidance strategy is to minimize discussion of the sensitive topic when interacting with the other person in the conflict. Notice from these examples that avoidance does not necessarily mean that we have a low concern for both one's own and the other party's interests. We might be very concerned about the issue but conclude that avoidance is the best solution, at least in the short term.³⁷
- *Yielding.* Yielding involves giving in completely to the other side's wishes, or at least cooperating with little or no attention to your own interests. This style involves making unilateral concessions and unconditional promises, as well as offering help with no expectation of reciprocal help.
- *Compromising.* Compromising involves looking for a position in which your losses are offset by equally valued gains. It involves actively searching for a middle ground between the interests of the two parties. Compromising also is associated with matching the other party's concessions and making conditional offers ("If you do X, I'll do Y.").

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SELF-ASSESSMENT 10.1: What is Your Preferred Conflict-Handling Style?

There are five main conflict-handling styles that people use in response to conflict situations. We are usually most comfortable using one or two of these styles based on our personality, values, self-concept, and past experience. You can discover your preferred conflict-handling styles by locating this self-assessment in Connect if it is assigned by your instructor.

Choosing the Best Conflict-Handling Style

Chances are that you prefer one or two conflict-handling styles more than the others. You might typically engage in avoiding or yielding because disagreement makes you feel uncomfortable and is contrary to your self-view as someone who likes to get along with everyone. Or perhaps you prefer the compromising and forcing strategies because they reflect your strong need for achievement and to control your environment. People usually gravitate toward one or two conflict-handling styles that match their personality, personal and cultural values, and past experience.³⁸ However, the best style depends on the situation, so we need to understand and develop the capacity to use any of the five styles for the appropriate occasions.³⁹ The contingencies, as well as problems with using each conflict-handling style, are outlined in [Exhibit 10.4](#).