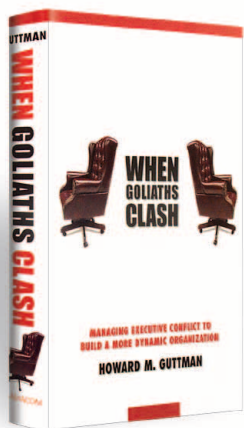




# Executive Book Summaries®

FILE: LEADERSHIP



By Howard M. Guttman

## Managing Executive Conflict To Build a More Dynamic Organization

# WHEN GOLIATHS CLASH

### THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

*Working in fast-paced, stressful conditions with different types of people, all with their own beliefs, values, cultures and work ethics, can cause conflict in even the most basic business relationships. Unresolved conflict in organizations, especially at the highest level, can have dire consequences, such as low productivity, employees' anger and hostility, increased costs, and increased absenteeism and turnover. It's important to realize that conflict handled properly can actually be a great asset to a company. When conflict is managed well, it can lead to new ideas, improved teamwork and commitment, and a better understanding of the people who work alongside you day in and day out. When managers, especially at the highest levels, understand the root causes of conflict, they can be effective in using the conflict as a springboard to greater production and higher achievement.*

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### What You'll Learn In This Summary

- ✓ **The causes of conflict.** Knowing the telltale signs of conflict can help managers analyze what's causing it and deal with it effectively.
- ✓ **How to align your group to work together.** Forming a group that agrees on strategic and operational goals makes it easier for group members to agree on ground rules and their roles for the project.
- ✓ **How to prevent conflicts from occurring.** Avoiding personal attacks, respecting the opinions of others and resolving conflict as quickly as possible are a few of the techniques described.
- ✓ **Changing the "me" to "we."** Take the steps necessary to emulate high-performance work teams who focus on the team's goals and not individual goals.
- ✓ **Effective leadership manages conflict.** The management style and interpersonal skills of an organization's senior management dictates how conflict affects the company.

# WHEN GOLIATHS CLASH

by Howard M. Guttman

## — THE COMPLETE SUMMARY

### Anatomy of Conflict

Many companies become paralyzed by unresolved conflict. For these organizations, it is important to understand that putting an end to conflict is not a desirable goal. Conflict should be managed, not eliminated.

Conflict is destructive when it:

- Leads to a win-lose game in which one side wins at the other's expense.
- Diverts energy from important activities or issues.
- Destroys people's morale.
- Polarizes groups and destroys cooperation.
- Produces irresponsible or regrettable behavior (e.g., personal attacks).
- Leads to stalemates rather than decisions.

Observing and accepting differences is helpful and necessary. Discussing employees' disagreements can improve problem-solving and be an asset for decision making. Airing opposing viewpoints can bring about new ideas and strategies.

Though most people are not aware of it, conflict keeps a company alive and flourishing when it:

- Stimulates healthy interaction among employees collaborating on a task.
- Opens up discussion about important issues.
- Strengthens team spirit and commitment to group goals.
- Results in better solutions to a problem.
- Improves the quality of a group's work.

Whether conflict works for or against an organization depends on one vital thing: how it is managed.

Through words and actions, effective managers send the message that conflicting opinions must not be swept under the rug. Those opinions can encourage workers to have open, productive dialogue that can benefit the entire organization.

### The Roots of Conflict

Conflict occurs when the needs and desires of two or more parties are incompatible. When those parties strive for the same thing — whether it is money, materials, space, time or any other resource — they are in conflict. The word conflict comes from the Latin *fligere* (“to strike”) and *com* (“together”), so it is not surprising that common terms used to describe conflict are “clashing” or “butting heads.”

When people who have individual needs work together, there is always the potential for disagreement. At some point in all personal relationships, conflict is inevitable, and the same is true of business relationships. In what situation other than business are people with different cultural backgrounds, values, beliefs, and

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### Test Your Conflict-Management IQ

How effectively does your organization manage conflict? The more questions below to which you answer “yes,” the greater your company's need to examine its conflict-management procedures:

- ✓ Is your business strategy fuzzy or unclear? Does your senior management team often debate its meaning?
- ✓ Do people in your company arrive late for meetings or not at all?
- ✓ Do meetings often deteriorate into chaos?
- ✓ Do you need to have more meetings than you should because closure is never reached?
- ✓ Does the atmosphere become tense when a certain executive enters the room or a particular issue is raised?
- ✓ Are priorities constantly changing? Are people unclear about who owns issues?
- ✓ Are discussion and debate discouraged? Is silent agreement the norm?

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### Anatomy of Conflict

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psychological and emotional needs forced to work together for eight or more hours a day, year after year, trying to achieve a set of common goals?

Business conflict is not only found among the Goliaths at the top. It permeates organizations regardless of function or level on the corporate hierarchy.

More than ever, senior executives must be adept at managing conflict throughout their organizations. To do this, they must understand more about the roots of conflict, the reasons why conflict is essential to the human condition.

#### What Causes Conflict?

There are two main sources of conflict among people in both personal and business relationships: *individual differences* and *stylistic clashes*.

**Individual Differences.** No two human beings — not even identical twins — are alike in all aspects. Because we are all unique, we all have differences with one another. We all bring to relationships different:

- **Wants and needs**
- **Values and beliefs**
- **Assumptions and interpretations**
- **Degrees of knowledge and information**
- **Expectations**
- **Cultures**

When we interact with people whose wants, needs, values, beliefs, assumptions and interpretations differ from our own, we might find ourselves in conflict with them. But that does not mean we have to butt heads with them. People can have different opinions without taking those differences personally. One of the keys to successfully managing conflict is learning to depersonalize it, or simply view it as a business situation to be handled.

**Stylistic Clashes.** In a business context, style means the ways each individual approaches interpersonal communication. Some people are comfortable revealing their innermost thoughts and feelings, while others find it extremely awkward and embarrassing to open up, especially in front of a group.

Effective communication is critical for resolving differences, and we all must be aware of how we communicate. What is our primary style? Do we use it some, all or most of the time? Do we vary our style depending on the situation? Do we vary it depending on the person with whom we are communicating or the issue that is confronting us?

Although human behavior cannot be separated into neat categories, it is helpful to think about communication methods in three broad styles: *nonassertive*,

*assertive* and *aggressive*. It is very difficult to accurately identify your own personal style.

#### Options for Coping With Conflict

There are four ways in which people in a conflict-laden situation can deal with it:

**1. Play the victim.** Say nothing, act powerless and complain.

**2. Leave.** Physically move away from involvement.

**3. Change yourself.** Move from your original position, change your view of the other parties, or just “let the situation go.”

**4. Confront.** Address the issue openly, candidly and objectively by communicating with the other party.

Confronting conflict head-on is one of the hardest things for an organization to do. To accomplish this, executives must start by debunking the many myths about conflict.

Most people believe that conflict is caused by difficult, quarrelsome people who simply can't or won't change; that successful teamwork requires a conflict-free environment; that people can't separate disagreements over business issues from personal attacks; and that confronting another person or group always leaves bad feelings. But not one of these myths addresses a fundamental truth about conflict: It is and always will be. ■

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### Why Goliaths Clash

Senior executive teams have a strong, steady effect on the psyche of an organization. They are highly visible role models who deliver a powerful, implied message to others: My behavior shows how a senior executive operates — do likewise.

Strategic conflict — disagreement at the top over the future direction of the organization — is conflict at its deadliest and is the hardest type of conflict to resolve.

#### Resolving Strategic Conflict

Guaranteeing the success of a company's business strategy should be the top priority of every senior management team. Strategy is the way an organization defines its future. Disagreements among senior executives about future products, key capabilities, financial targets and growth expectations create friction among the group that can weaken the foundation of a company. How can a senior team resolve conflict that prevents it from delivering the results its board members and stockholders expect?

Effective conflict management begins with alignment. To operate at peak performance, a senior team must be aligned and reach agreement in four distinct areas:

- Strategic and operational goals must be clear, spe-

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### Why Goliaths Clash

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cific and agreed-upon.

- Team members' roles must be carefully defined so each member knows exactly what he or she is responsible for and what he or she is authorized to do.
- Ground rules must be established to guide group behavior.
- The broad range of personal styles that team members use when interacting with one another must be understood and managed.

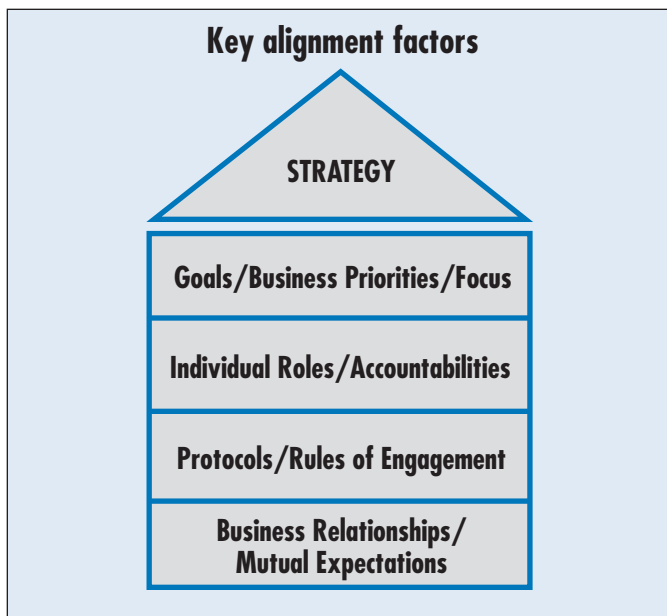
#### **Individual Roles and Accountability**

One approach to dealing with lack of alignment is to hold a formal session on the subject with the senior team. Before beginning the alignment session, it is useful to ask participants the following two questions: "How clear are you about your role and accountability on the team?" and "How clear are you about your role and accountability in the organization?"

Many CEOs are surprised to learn that many people on their staff cannot answer these questions well. What these leaders don't realize is that none of their workers operates in a vacuum — workers are constantly interacting with one another. Chances are they have not discussed what their roles are and what they expect from one another.

#### **Rules of Engagement**

Having goals and rules clearly set out will get you only so far. Procedures for resolving conflicts — think of them as ground rules for behavior both within the team and outside of it — are key elements in the conflict-management process:



### Alignment at Johnson & Johnson

How can a huge, multinational company made up of many subsidiaries keep everyone in all those business units on the same page?

Johnson & Johnson (J&J) knows how. Health care giant J&J is a "portfolio organization" that consists of 195 subsidiary companies. The companies are organized into 20 "franchise groups" that make products for many different uses: skin and feminine health care, wound management and closure, analgesics, anti-infectives and painkillers to name only a few.

Because each franchise must have the same business focus as the parent company, each year J&J's senior team asks franchise leaders to develop their own strategic plans and submit them to the team for review and approval. Once a plan is approved, it's up to each franchise to translate its strategy into operational goals and action plans at every level.

According to Michael Carey, corporate vice president for human resources for J&J, the franchise strategies are tied together by the parent company's clear, common goals and values that reduce the possibility of misunderstandings.

These goals are clearly stated in two ways. The first is J&J's Statement of Strategic Direction, which explains that it will capitalize on its decentralized form of management and manage for the long term. The second is a list of four company-wide goals identified by the executive committee: innovation, process excellence, e-business and flawless execution.

- **Don't "triangulate."** Triangulation is bringing an issue to a third-party mediator for resolution. Triangulation is an attempt to avoid responsibility by using the third party to handle an issue that should be resolved head-on between two people.

- **Don't recruit supporters to your point of view.** We all know people whose main mission in life is advancing their own cause. They are always looking for opportunities to win people over to their side, and they make private disagreements public by bad-mouthing anyone who dares to contradict them. This form of third-party recruiting doesn't bring about positive changes in behavior; it tears apart, rather than unites, the team.

- **Resolve it or let it go.** The longer conflict remains unresolved, the greater the chance that it will grow, spreading negative feelings throughout the team. To cut off conflict before it spreads, some teams establish a deadline (e.g., the conflict must be resolved in 24 or 48 hours). When two members of a team have a conflict,

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### Why Goliaths Clash

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the team leader gives them a deadline to resolve it. If they cannot resolve the issue by the deadline, they must drop the issue and move on.

● **Don't accuse in absentia.** At a team meeting, if someone brings up an issue that involves another team member who is not at the meeting, the discussion should stop immediately. The team owes it to the missing team member to postpone further debate until he or she can be present.

● **Don't personalize issues.** John Stuart Mill once observed that the key to progress is letting all ideas start off even in the race, and eventually the truth will prevail. In business, differences of opinion can stimulate new ideas and lead to a favorable outcome for all parties. ■

### High-Performance Teams and Conflict Management

The one competitive advantage that cannot be bought, copied or made obsolete is excellent management of people and processes, including the management of conflict. The best way for an organization to achieve this advantage is by creating and nurturing high-performance teams from the top down.

High-performance teams are powerful because they bring together diverse viewpoints, experiences, judgments and capabilities. Diversity can often create damaging conflict, but not in high-performance teams, where open and direct conflict is actually valued.

High-performance teams do not follow the traditional corporate hierarchy. Employees are asked, often for the first time, to assume individual and collective responsibility for business results. These teams focus on the customer instead of their bosses, and they view their work efforts as benefiting the group, not just their own departments.

#### *The High-Performance Team*

B.W. Tuckman, a pioneer of group-development theory, summarized the results of more than 50 studies conducted on team development into a four-stage model: forming, storming, norming and performing. An expanded version of the Tuckman model makes it more relevant to the new performance environment of the horizontal organization.

Looking closely at the behaviors that characterize teams at each stage of the model can help a team understand the obstacles it must overcome to reach stage four.

Stage one of the expanded model is “testing.” In stage one, many teams are made up of individuals working together for the first time. Their initial behaviors include

testing and assessing each other to determine the level of candor that will be accepted by the team and the team leader. Tensions run high. Conflict is often suppressed rather than addressed, and there is a fear of confronting issues and individuals.

Stage two is “infighting.” Stage two often begins after teams have been working together for a while and have fallen into a set behavioral routine. It is where viewpoints are aggressively advanced. It is filled with accusations, finger-pointing and backbiting. Executives feel vulnerable and on the line. It is also where many breakthroughs in conflict resolution take place.

#### *Getting Organized*

Stage three is “getting organized.” Stage-three teams have realized that to become high performers, they cannot continue to bury conflict or allow it to run rampant. They must transform conflict into dynamic energy that produces results. Teams in stage three are in a learning mode. They are in the process of clarifying roles and goals while they develop skills and establish procedures. At this point they are confronting issues, not people, and giving feedback.

Stage four is “the high-performance team.” In stage four, the team translates into action the lessons it has learned during its evolution through the previous three stages. Stage-four teams share eight key attributes that separate high-performance teams from their less-effective counterparts:

**1. The mission, goals and business priorities of the team are clear to all team members.** For a team to operate at peak performance, these standards must be clear to all members.

**2. The team is comprised of the “right” players.** As individuals further down in the organization begin to serve on teams, it becomes essential that all employees have three competencies. They must be technically proficient in their particular function; they must have the communication skills to build support for their project across functions; and they must be able to understand their organization's strategy and how it affects their day-to-day actions.

#### *Waiting Compounds Conflict*

**3. The roles and responsibilities of each player are clear to that person and to all team members.** The team leader should step in as soon as it becomes apparent that there is confusion in this area. Waiting only compounds the conflict.

**4. Team members are committed to the team “winning” — achieving business goals — over their own self-interest.** When teams focus on common goals and become comfortable sharing their opinions, individual

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### High-Performance Teams and Conflict Management

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members begin seeing themselves as serving two roles in the organization. They are no longer only conduits between their departments and the team; they are also active members of a team committed to helping the group achieve its goals.

**5. The decision-making process that the team employs is understood and accepted by all team members.** When a team meets, there are three ways it can make decisions: unilaterally, consultatively or by consensus. It is often best to use different decision-making processes to handle different issues.

**6. Every team member feels a sense of ownership or accountability for the business results that the team must achieve.** The notion of shared accountability is an important and unique aspect of high-performance teams.

#### *Comfortable With Conflict*

**7. All team members are comfortable dealing with team conflict.** Candor and depersonalization become second nature. When team members realize that they will be applauded rather than punished for expressing opinions honestly and constructively, they no longer hold back.

**8. The team periodically evaluates its progress, focusing on how it functions as a cohesive group.** To ensure that a high-performance team keeps its edge, it must be in a continuous learning mode, acquiring and honing the skills it needs to do a project well. ■

For Additional Information on how an intimidating leader “toned down”, go to: <http://my.summary.com>

### The Road to High Performance

Teams that have been working together in a state of dysfunction for a long time carry a lot of interpersonal conflict. When team members comment on the way they work together, they usually feel a great deal of discomfort. It takes tremendous courage to stand up in front of your business associates and admit that you are making mistakes now and then. During discussions aimed at diffusing conflicts, it is important to talk about issues openly without making personal attacks.

Some typical behaviors that can damage the team effort are:

- Not sharing information.
- Being aloof from the rest of the group.
- Going “underground” with complaints.
- Listening to and commiserating with co-workers’

complaints instead of encouraging them to resolve them.

- Triangulating by trying to get support for their own interests from their superiors and others.

#### *Becoming a High-Performance Organization*

Alignment does not stop with the Goliaths of senior management. They exert tremendous influence over the organization, but the Davids in every function must also play their part.

To become a high-performance team, most organizations must pass through five major steps, or phases:

#### *Phase One: Defining the Business Need*

An organization’s journey to high performance begins with a business need — specifically, the need to take performance to a new level. The move from Stage One to Stage Five requires an intense desire to win in the marketplace.

#### *Phase Two: Structuring the Teams*

At this point, most senior teams must answer some basic questions about the business teams that are going to be formed:

- How many members will be on each of the teams?
- Which individuals will be on the teams?
- Who will be the team leader of each team?
- What will the teams be accountable for?
- How will each team’s success be measured?
- How will team members be rewarded for success?

In a company where new teams are being set up, getting answers to these questions usually requires a long period of discussion before agreement is reached.

#### *Phase Three: Aligning the Teams*

At this point, the focus shifts to the senior team to ensure that its goals, roles, processes and business relationships are consistent with high-performance requirements.

Every individual on a team plays a dual role: gatekeeper to his or her function and team member. The leader of the team has even trickier tasks to perform:

- Confronting the team with candid observations of group and individual behavior and the potential consequences to the team’s performance.
- Soliciting team members’ comments to clarify their goals and intentions.
- Guiding the team as it begins to collaborate.
- Negotiating and recording contracts that define agreements about how the team will work together.
- Displaying two behaviors that are important to effective teamwork: *candid disclosure* and *openness to feedback*.

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### The Road to High Performance

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#### Phase Four: Moving the Message

As with any major organizational change, successfully creating high-performance teams requires effective communication and the buy-in of all employees involved.

High performance is not just talking. It involves explaining the transformation of the team, testing the understanding of group members, relating back to everyone's job, and then answering the question everyone wants to ask: What's in it for me?

To give everyone a satisfactory answer, team discussions must center around the amount of decision-making authority the team has, how often senior management will meet with the team to review results, and how conflicts within the team will be resolved.

#### Phase Five: Maintaining the Momentum

Moving to the "performing" part of the process, a team must put into practice the things it discussed during alignment sessions. Promises must be kept to change destructive behaviors such as letting go of damaging or mean-spirited criticisms, being candid and encouraging candor in others, refusing to triangulate, and putting loyalty to the team above self-interest. The

### E-Mail Etiquette

According to Disney's Michael Eisner, "E-mail's very virtues also make it dangerous — it is instant, global, quick and easy. It becomes easy to be rude, easy to use language incorrectly, easy to make stupid mistakes, easy to do irreparable harm."

Here are some tips on how to avoid conflicts from misuse of e-mail:

- **Use the right medium for the message.** E-mail is an effective tool for one-way communication, but it doesn't lend itself to situations that require interactive communication.
- **Deliver your messages clearly.** When you send an e-mail message, identify the goal of your message and get right to the point.
- **Practice the "Golden Rule."** Put yourself in the recipient's shoes and ask yourself how you'd feel if you received the message you're about to send.
- **Respect confidentiality.** You'll lose the trust of others if you pass confidential e-mails along to people not authorized to read them.
- **When in doubt, DON'T.** If you are angry or upset, don't send your message. Save it and read it again after you have calmed down to make sure it is appropriate for the situation.

written and verbal contracts made among team members about business relationships and responsibilities must become working documents. ■

### Conflict Management As Art and Skill

In the "old" organization with many levels of authority, power ruled. Teams were a collection of individuals, usually from the same function, who were led by the person occupying the "power position" in the chain of command. Although subordinates on the team were allowed to express themselves, they usually functioned as information sources who served the leader or decision maker.

Later, the "horizontal" organization swept away much of the old-order remnants of power. In the new paradigm, the one who wins is not the person with the most clout, but the one who has the right combination of strategic instinct, technical capability, people skills and the ability to persuade.

#### Assessing Where You Stand

The second basic capability a leader must have is an understanding of how he or she deals with conflict. This involves being crystal clear on where you stand in terms of the two personality dimensions — *assertiveness* and *cooperativeness*.

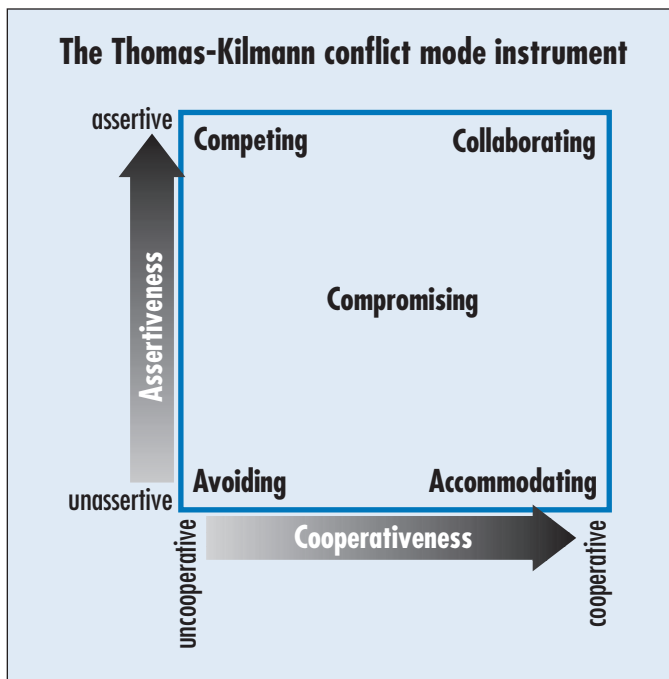
Assertiveness is the extent to which a person attempts to satisfy his or her own needs. Cooperativeness is the extent to which an individual attempts to satisfy another person's needs. Examining these two basic dimensions of behavior in one's own personality makes it possible to assess the balance that exists between the concern for oneself and a concern for others.

It also becomes possible to identify five distinct methods that people employ when dealing with conflict. The Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument in the figure on the next page is a graphic representation of these five methods.

Thomas and Kilmann define each method as follows:

- **Competing implies being assertive and uncooperative.** A person who chooses this method is more interested in pursuing his or her own interests at the expense of others, and using whatever power is necessary to win.
- **Accommodating means being unassertive and cooperative.** This method, which is the opposite of competing, implies self-sacrifice. The accommodating person chooses to neglect his or her own concerns to satisfy the concerns of others. This method requires giving in to another's point of view when you prefer not to.
- **Avoiding is being unassertive and uncooperative.** A person using this method chooses not to take action at

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### Conflict Managements as Art and Skill

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this time, either for himself or herself or for others. As a result, the conflict is not addressed. The avoidance behavior may involve sidestepping discussion of a past issue, postponing it, or withdrawing from what the person feels is a threatening situation.

- **Compromising involves being square in the middle in terms of both assertiveness and cooperativeness.** This method is often efficient. Both parties try to quickly arrive at a middle ground by “splitting the difference.” The end result might be a solution that is mutually acceptable yet only partially satisfying to each side.

- **Collaborating means both assertive and cooperative.** Collaborating requires that both sides work together to find a solution that fully satisfies the concerns of each side. It involves listening, empathizing and exploring each other’s strategic goals and concerns.

#### *Using Assertion Skills*

When your needs are pressing, assertion skills are the solution. The trick here is maintaining the delicate balance between standing up for what you need while respecting the needs of others.

The nonassertive individual, in effect, says, “I’ve got needs and so do you, but I’m not telling you what mine are. And if you don’t guess them, I’m going to hold it against you.” The nonassertive individual is a volcano waiting to erupt. At the other extreme, the aggressive person proceeds on the basis that “I’ve got needs and so do you, but mine count more.” The aggressive person is the schoolyard bully in business attire.

People who are nonassertive must learn how to protect their boundaries — whether physical or psychological — and express their agenda without crossing the line to aggression. The aggressive individual, in contrast, must learn not to violate the boundaries of other people.

Each type of behavior has payoffs, and each exacts a price. For the nonassertive executive, the payoff is avoiding arguments and coming across as a team player, but the price is steep in terms of unmet needs and reduced effectiveness. Aggressive executives tend to get their way and benefit from their bullying behavior. They pay the price, however, by alienating other people, stifling input and feedback, and failing to gain commitment, especially in the new knowledge-based organization. ■

For Additional Information on active listening, go to:  
<http://my.summary.com>

## Leadership in Conflict Management

A leader’s style is very important to successful conflict management. The continuum along which behavior ranges goes from nonassertive to assertive to aggressive. When the behavior of the most senior executive falls into one of the two extremes on the continuum, there is certain to be fallout.

The nice-guy model of leadership doesn’t work because such a leader will try to avoid confrontation, when in many instances, constructive confrontation is exactly what is needed. Neither does the aggressive approach. The tough-guy leader typically carries baggage that is unsuited for building a high-performance team, such as being controlling, unreceptive to feedback, and intimidating.

#### *Methods of Improvement*

The following guidelines will help any manager improve his or her conflict-management skills:

- **Be candid.** When issues surface, bring them out in the open for discussion.
- **Be receptive.** Discuss all competing points of view. Let everyone on your team know that it is not only safe to disagree, it is expected.
- **Depersonalize.** Look at each issue that surfaces as a business case, rather than as a personal indictment.
- **Be clear about the decision-making rules of the game.** Will the issue under discussion be decided unilaterally, consultatively or by consensus?
- **Learn to listen.** A key skill here is decoding and feeding back the messages you think you are hearing.
- **Recognize and reward successful conflict management when you see it.** ■