Conflict Management
Advice for Negotiating Conflict in Your Professional Life

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Your professional success depends on how well you manage conflict

Why consider how to handle conflict?

- You will have it

- Your success depends on managing it

- People have long memories

- Properly handled conflict can lead to better outcomes than the status quo

What is conflict?

From the dictionary:

- fight, battle, controversy, struggle, discord of action, incompatibility; a state of open fighting; to come into collision, disagreement; fight or contend

What is conflict?

From the conflict resolution community:

- **Conflict** is when two or more values, perspectives and opinions are contradictory in nature

- *Conflict* is a disagreement where the parties involved perceive a <u>threat to their needs</u> which is resolved when a mutually satisfactory solution is achieved

Badly handled conflict makes things worse

Open break

Communication impossible
Avoidance, rigid thinking
The other party is "bad"

Alert!

Solutions are still possible
Some avoidance and emotional difficulties
People can salvage the relationship

Opportunity

Exploring opinions, improving processes, creative solutions
Intellectual argument
No dislike or emotional difficulties

Overview

- Conflict resolution styles

- Parsing out conflict in common scenarios:
  - VPN analysis
  - TRIP goals analysis

- Communication techniques and self-knowledge

Before we start conflict styles

- Find the "Welcome" worksheet
  - Take 2 minutes to jot down one conflict in your life that has given you significant difficulty

- Find the "Conflict Resolution Styles" handout
  - this survey is widely available; I got this version from the LA school district website, and a similar one is available from the UNC nursing school website. Just Google 'conflict management shark bear'

What's your conflict management style?
(your LOWEST score)
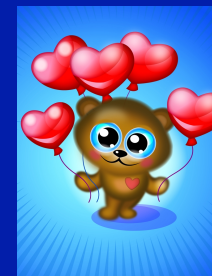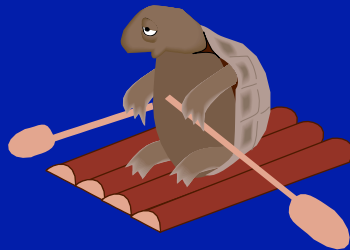
Competing Shark

- Sharks use a forcing or competing conflict management style; goals > relationships

- Shark: "Do it my way…..or else!"

- Advantages:
  - Immediate short term gain
  - Rapid decisions
  - Possible long term benefit (if truly correct)
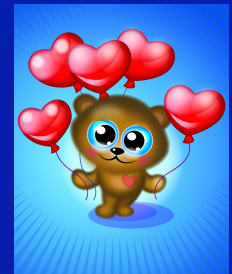
- Disadvantages: Relationships damaged

Avoiding Turtle

- Turtles avoid conflicts at all costs

- Turtles: "I give up; I just won't be around."

- Advantages: Relationships may be maintained

- Disadvantages:
  – Conflict lingers
  – Turtle failure and possible team failure
  – Long-term resentments
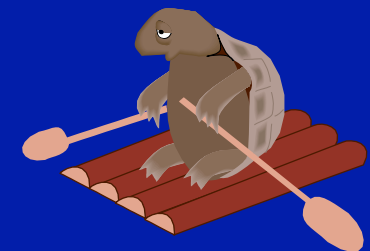
Accommodating Teddy Bear

- Bears use a smoothing or accommodating conflict management style; relationships> goals

- Bears: "It's OK, I'll make it work…(somehow)."

- Advantages: Relationship maintained

- Disadvantages:
  – Bear taken advantage of; possible bear failure
  – Long-term resentments

Compromising Fox

- Foxes use a compromising conflict management style; concern is for goals AND relationships

- Fox: "I'll give you this if you give me that."

- Advantages:
  – Relationships maintained
  – Solutions found

- Disadvantages:
  – Jump too fast to the first obvious solution
  – Optimal solutions missed

Collaborating Owl

- Owls use a collaborating conflict management style valuing their goals AND relationships

- Owls: "Let's fix this so we all get ahead."

- Advantages:
  – Relationships are maintained and best possible solutions obtained

- Disadvantages:
  – Time and difficulty
  – Possible need for an outside facilitator

Awareness: try to work toward fox or owl

- Short term benefits vs. long-term goals

- If you tend toward shark behavior:
  - You get immediate rewards—BUT people have long memories

- If you tend toward turtle or teddy bear behavior:
  - You avoid conflict—BUT your academic career may be hurt

Choose your style depending on the conflict (and your partner)
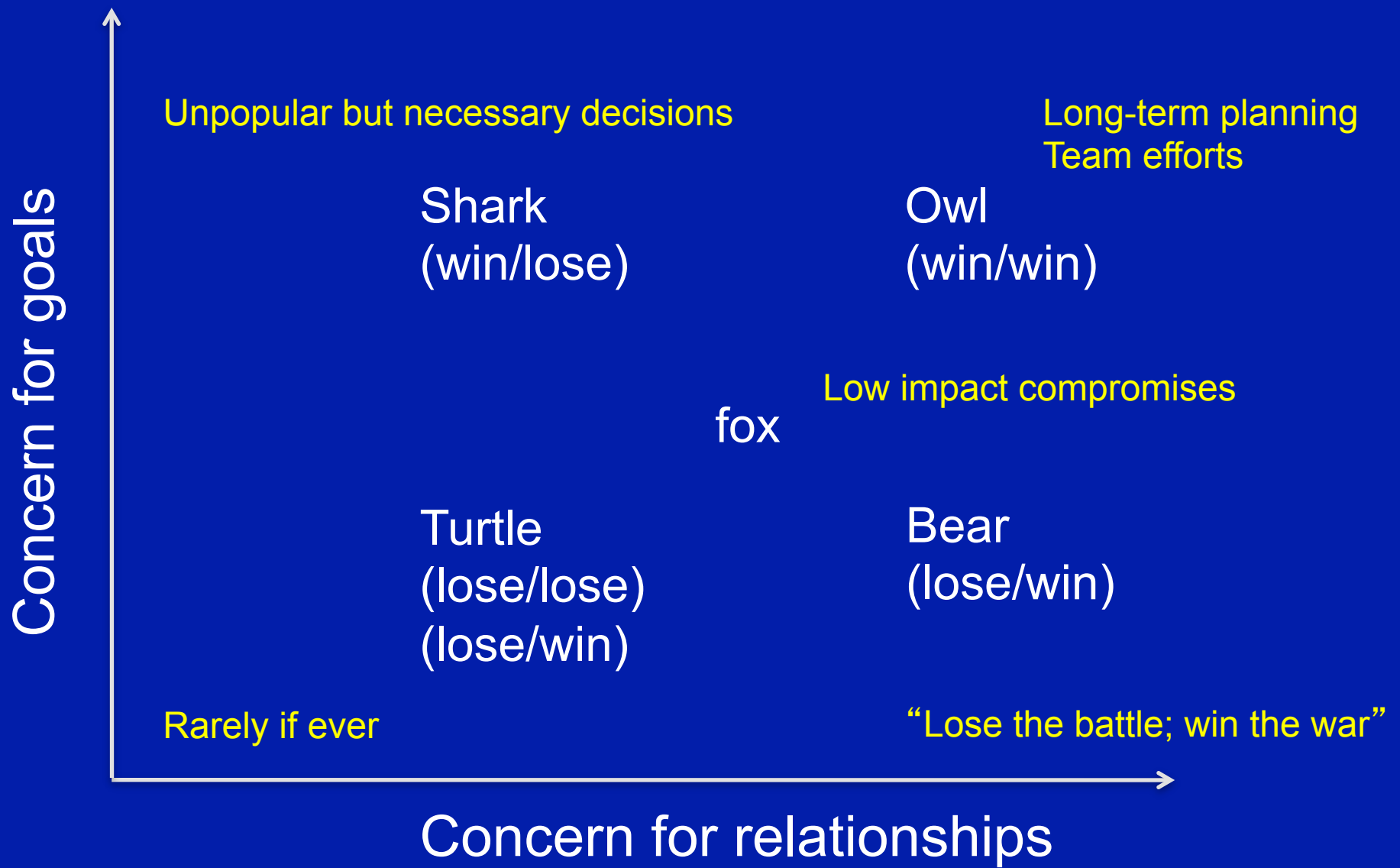
Concern for goals →

Concern for relationships →

Unpopular but necessary decisions

Long-term planning
Team efforts

Shark
(win/lose)

Owl
(win/win)

Low impact compromises

fox

Turtle
(lose/lose)
(lose/win)

Bear
(lose/win)

Rarely if ever

"Lose the battle; win the war"

Overview

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- Parsing out conflict in common scenarios:
  – values, perceptions, and needs (VPN)
  – TRIP goals

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Two ways of looking at the same thing: conflict is not (just) about the issue

- VPN (values, perceptions, needs)
  - Mayer, *The Dynamics of Conflict Resolution*

- TRIP (topic, relationship, identity, process)
  - Wilmot and Hocker, *Interpersonal Conflict*

Some common grad school issues:

- Being stuck on a project that isn't right for you

- Not getting the type of feedback you need

- Not having time to do everything and to focus on your own research

- Feeling that you are doing more than your share of the work or of less attractive projects/scutwork

- Worrying about authorship and apportioning credit

General classes of conflict

- Conflict in a hierarchical situation

  Advisor-student relationships; teacher-student relationships; boss-employee relationships

- Conflict within hierarchical overlapping spheres of influence

  Interdisciplinary projects; student/advisor/committee conflict; authorship disputes; multiple advisors

- Conflict in a team situation

  Laboratory- or field-based studies; team teaching responsibilities; collaborations

Parsing out conflict: VPN analysis

- Value: worth, importance, desirability

- Perception: how you "see" or a situation

- Need: requirement

VPN: conflict in a hierarchical relationship

- Values
  - Priority setting between goals
  - Knowledge of overarching goals may be unequally shared

- Perceptions
  - Who should have decision-making power; autonomy within roles; what constitutes meeting a goal; process vs. product

- Needs
  - Clear definition of roles and non-contradictory incentives
  - Resources necessary to do the job and ability to succeed
  - Respect, influence, self-efficacy, "to be heard"

Conflict between members of a team

- Values
  - Priority setting between goals

- Perceptions
  - How things are going; most feasible way to reach goals

- Needs
  - Clear definition of roles
  - Non-contradictory incentives
  - Resources necessary to do the job and ability to succeed
  - Respect, influence, self-efficacy

You try VPN for your 'favorite' conflict
(we will re-start in 5 min)

- Values

- Perceptions

- Needs: and these are valid!
  - Tangible
  - Intangible

Parsing out conflict: TRIP analysis

- **Topic goal**: what is this conflict nominally about?

- **Relationship goal**: what do the participants want in terms of the relationship(s)?

- **Identity goal**: how do the participants want to see themselves and be seen by others?

- **Process goal**: what processes do the participants think should be used to solve the conflict?

Conflict in most graduate school relationships

- Topic goal
  - Probably shared, but maybe imperfectly understood

- Relationship goal
  - Desire to maintain status
  - Desire to be seen as an equal or a contributor

- Identity goal
  - All participants may have multiple identity goals
  - Nice guy? Authority? Friend?

- Process goal

You try TRIP for your 'favorite' conflict
(we will re-start in 5 min)

- Topic goal

- Relationship goal

- Identity goal

- Process goal

2 minute reflection (worksheet)

- What did I learn from these exercises that I can apply to my approach to conflict?

- Did you have a preference for VPN or TRIP? Why?

- How aware of these issues were you for your 'favorite' conflict before you did the analysis?

- What types of information do you tend to miss when upset?

Group discussion

- How will you plan to minimize VPN or TRIP issues when you are leading?

- How might you incorporate what you know about conflict styles?

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So how do I figure out what the VPN/TRIP issues are?!!!!

- Answer: have a productive conversation

- Problem: it's not that simple

Why do people avoid having productive conversations about conflict?

- **Answer 1: Fear of losing something valuable**
  - Fear of loss outweighs anticipation of gains

- **Answer 2: Lack of understanding, confidence, skills**
  - People may not understand themselves or others
  - Lack of confidence in communication skills
  - Cultural issues
  - Language issues

- Solution: Make it "safe" and "easy" to talk

How to make it easy to talk

- Set the stage properly

- Use communication skills that promote ease

Suggestions for approaching a conflict

- Overall goal: identify what difference in values, perceptions, needs, or TRIP goals are key to resolving this issue

- Listen to understand: You want to know how the situation looks to the other person

- Speak to be understood: You want to respectfully and assertively communicate how the situation looks to you

Setting the stage, Part I

- Stop. Breathe. (Exercise).

- Identify your own styles, needs and goals

- Try to imagine others' styles, needs and goals

Setting the stage, Part II

- Ask the other party(s) for help resolving the issue

- Express the issue in a way that is as non-threatening as possible ("safety")
  - Use "I" statements
  - Limit to the issue at hand

- Propose a specific, time-limited meeting

- Express confidence that the situation can be solved
- Emphasize probable benefits

Once the stage is set: techniques for increasing safety and understanding

- Active listening

- Blending

- Asking direct questions

Active, reflective listening

- Listen carefully to what the speaker is saying

- Reflect back what *you think the speaker said*. Ask "is that what you meant?"

- Give the speaker time to reflect and refine

- Once you fully understand, then you can speak

Active, reflective listening

- Probably the most powerful thing you can do
  - "is the message sent the message received?"

- Helps with communication
  - Communication is not at its clearest during conflict
  - Many people need time to refine their own thinking
  - Prevents listener doing mental "rebuttal"

- Addresses fear, resentment, and safety concerns
  - People have a real need to be heard and taken seriously
  - Promotes empathy and reduces defensiveness
  - Allows "real" (VPN/TRIP) reasons for conflict to emerge

Blending

- Goal: reduce apparent differences between the parties; increase communication and rapport

- Things to think about:
  - Space, symbols, status
  - Verbal speed and vocabulary
  - Body movements, facial expressions

Ask direct questions

- Once you think the tension has drained off:

- Ask direct questions about VPN/TRIP issues
  - May cause alarm
  - Try "priming the pump"
    - "I'm just guessing here…."
    - "Is it possible that…"
    - "Sometimes, I think…"

  - Start with "I" statements

This sounds simple…why is it hard?
An experiential storytelling exercise

- Thanks to Marilyn Rosen

- Two-part storytelling exercise (see handout)

- Part 1: Focus on your own responses to even hearing about conflict

- Part 2: Try to "actively listen" to the father in the conflict

- Part 3: Reflect: what techniques did the son use?

Part 1

- Listen to part 1 of the story, and try to watch your own bodily responses and emotions

- After the story, make notes to yourself

Part 2

- Listen to part 2 of the story, and try to "actively listen" to the father. What is he saying?

- After the story, make notes to yourself

Part 3

- What else did you notice? How did the son diffuse the conflict?

After all parties have been heard and understood

- The conflict may be over

  - If the conflict was about an intangible which has been met by active listening and validation

  - If the conflict was about lack of information or about the need to convey information

  - If a solution has become obvious during the discussion

- The conflict may not be over….

If the conflict is not over

CONFLICT

Open discussion
→ Active listening
Discovery of VPN/TRIP

Participants angry?
Difficulties in speaking or listening?

YES

Conflict coaching
Ombudspersons
Mediation
Restorative circles

NO

Brainstorming, planning,
searching for win/win or
a good compromise

If communication is going well

- Identify common ground and shared goals/values

- Identify precisely where the conflict lies
  - Communication issues?
  - Goals are not the same?
  - Hierarchy of values not the same?
  - Perception of what happened not the same?
  - Competing needs?
  - TRIP goals not being met?

- Determine <u>what cannot</u> change and who must be involved

Brainstorming to get a good solution

- List as many solutions as possible
- Don't evaluate at first, just list
- No ideas are too silly
- Consider bringing in a trusted neutral to write

- Evaluate feasibility and desirability
- Refine, trade off concerns
- Pick one or a combination of ideas that makes everyone at least reasonably happy (OWL or FOX)

An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure

Some common conflict scenarios

- Advisor-student relationships
  - Giving and receiving feedback
  - Workload and timing
  - Support

- Conflict between members of a team
  - Assigning workload and duties
  - Deciding on priorities

- Authorship disputes

Preplanning to avoid conflict

- Look at your own style and needs before picking an advisor or research group

- Determine <u>what cannot change</u>

- Have open and frank discussions of needs and expectations on both sides before crises occur

- In fields with authorship disputes: planning and frequent revisiting is critical!!

Preplanning to avoid authorship disputes

- Research plans and directions change over time

- Make expectations excruciatingly clear
  - The shark/bear/turtle problem is especially relevant

- Have a plan, and revisit it OFTEN

Dealing with impending authorship disputes

- Identify the specific problem EARLY

- Communicate the problem clearly, backed by evidence (absolutely required)

- Seek an outside "reality check"

- Ask if it is time to renegotiate authorship or plans

- Brainstorm to identify possible solutions

Take-Home Messages!

- Know your own conflict style and choose mindfully

- Consider VPN and TRIP for yourself AND others

- Make it safe to talk

- Try to deal with conflict early and proactively

- Plan early and often

Thank you!

- Please give me some feedback (last page of packet)