
Lesson #3

Choosing a Conflict Management Response

Objective:

Participants will

- Consider the difference between instinctive reactions (fight and flight) and learned responses.
- Understand that disputants can choose a response based on their goals in the conflict and their values for the relationship.
- Consider ways to use this concept with other adults and with students.

Materials:

- Masking tape
- Posters or signs corresponding to the five responses (if available, stuffed animals or puppets are also appropriate)
- Poster or sign with the label “Goal”
- Poster or sign with the label “Relationship”
- Optional: Handout “Conflict Response Strategies”

Preparation:

Place masking tape strips on the floor to form a 90 degree angle. The strips should be long enough so that all participants can stand in the area outlined. Have ready five signs or posters with animals and responses. If available, use stuffed animals or puppets to correspond to the posters.¹

Procedure:

1. Describe the instinctive reactions of fight and flight. Explain that instinctive responses are reactions to brain chemistry, initiated by stress (such as fear, anger), and their effect on thinking. Make a transition to learned responses: competing, withdrawing, accommodating, compromising and collaborating. Refer to the animals as memory aids. Point out that the competing and withdrawing responses are similar to fight and flight but that they are chosen rather than instinctive.

2. Draw the graph which shows the relationship of the responses. Emphasize the value of all responses, each appropriate in some circumstances, depending on goals and relationships. Ask participants what they think might be the costs and benefits of each response. Ask for examples of appropriate uses for each (the “lion,” when it’s an issue of law, health, or safety; the “turtle,” when it’s none of my business; the “dolphin,” when we need to solve a problem in a way that everybody can live with; the “zebra,” to save

¹ Floor Activity developed by Madeleine G. Trichel and Jo Dee Davis.

time and get part of what I need; the “chameleon,” when somebody is having a rough time at home; and so on).

3. Ask the group for an example of a conflict they might encounter. When the group has sufficient details, point out the graph on the floor and put the animal signs at the appropriate places. Ask participants to decide what response they would choose for the example given and then to stand in the graph in the appropriate place.

4. When everyone is arranged, point out the range of responses. If stuffed animals or puppets are available, toss the appropriate one into a group (or to the single participant standing at each response.) Ask the catcher to pass or to explain the reason for choosing that response. Do this with each group, commenting, answering questions, encouraging conversation among groups. Participants may wish to change places, once they hear another’s rationale for a different choice. Point out that people frequently try one response first, and if it does not work, they try something else.

The important point is that people have reasons for the choices they make.

5. Repeat with another example as time allows.

6. Conclude by asking participants to reflect on

- How can we use this information in our classrooms?
- How can we use this information in our school?
- How does this information apply to our School Conflict Management Action Plan?

HANDOUT

CONFLICT RESPONSE STRATEGIES

Most people develop a dominant or customary response to conflict. Often the customary response at home is different from the customary response in the school or other professional community. In any case, responses vary according to the balance between focus on a personal goal or on the relationship.

To be an effective Conflict Manager, people need to learn to use the whole range of responses in appropriate circumstances. In schools, as in any setting this may be difficult because of power imbalances or because there is little time spent on building the productive and supportive relationships which make Collaborative Problem-Solving and Compromise possible. In addition, strong belief systems and professional opinions sometimes limit the choice and understanding of responses to conflict.

