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**ADMINISTRATION & LEADERSHIP**

**What Conflict Leadership Style Do You Use?**

Whether a leader is avoidant or aggressive or addresses conflict constructively can have a major impact on a school’s ability to navigate tough challenges.

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Leaders devote between 20 and 40 percent of their day to managing conflict. Typically, they adopt a dominant conflict leadership style, a go-to approach to mediate friction between and among teachers, building administrators, parents, and central office staff. However, this style may prove ineffective or even counterproductive, resulting in aggravated stress levels, frustration, and stymied school reform efforts.

In this article, we take a deeper dive into three leadership modalities, showing how school leaders can effectively resolve conflict.

**CONFLICT LEADERSHIP STYLES IN EDUCATION**

Workplace expert Amy Gallo [believes the reaction](https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/mckinsey-on-books/author-talks-turn-your-work-enemies-into-allies) to conflict is an evolutionary vestige deeply implanted in the human brain. She writes, “Our brain perceives conflict as a threat, and our brain doesn’t do a good job of distinguishing between a small threat, like someone rolling their eyes at us, and a big threat, like being chased down by a bear. We often don’t make good choices in those moments because, in fight or flight mode, there’s really two options: I can shut down, or I can be aggressive.” We see these ineffective responses show up in schools as well.

We can think of conflict leadership styles in terms of three As: avoidance, aggression, and addressing the problem. Which of the following typifies your approach to conflict?

Avoidance: The successful administrator’s job is to keep the school calm and all stakeholders happy. Since conflict creates disorder and makes people uncomfortable, the leader’s job is to avoid it as much as possible.

Aggression: Effective school leaders are transactional, building coalitions by rewarding allies and keeping opponents at bay. When dissent emerges, leaders must vigorously defend their positions, using administrative prerogatives, such as superior performance ratings and more face time, to bolster supporters, while pressuring adversaries to join forces by dispensing negative reinforcement.

Addressing: Conflict is inevitable, and indeed constructive, as skillful leaders harness these opportunities to surface substantive issues and identify a range of feasible solutions in collaboration with the school community.

**AVOIDANT LEADERS**

These leaders eschew conflict. Disputes over policy and practice can rupture relationships and are commonly viewed as a sign of [organizational dysfunction](https://www.edutopia.org/article/conflict-management-schools). Some avoidance reactions are blatant; many administrators exhibit a palpable aversion to engaging disagreement. Other times, avoidance strategies are more subtle. Here are some examples you may have experienced.

One approach to avoidance is called *orbiting*, referring disputes to perpetual meetings. It’s a form of procrastination captured by the phrase “death by committee.” In the faculty room, a teacher might report, “I eagerly joined the committee believing our job was to choose a new math curriculum. Instead, we’ve been rehashing alternatives in a series of never-ending meetings.”

Another example is *picking low-hanging fruit*, or limiting action to easily achievable, noncontroversial matters while ignoring more substantive concerns. For example: “The district’s Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Committee started with lofty hopes, but after two years, all we have to show for our efforts are ethnic heritage bulletin board displays in each building. They’re heartwarming but don’t come close to dealing with the weighty issues our district faces.”

Other leaders promote a veneer of collegiality in lieu of confronting potentially fractious issues. In the name of social amity, they avoid wrestling with meaty school problems. You may hear teachers remark, “In our seventh-grade team meetings, we review last weekend’s social calendar, update each other on family news, and share juicy school gossip... we never even have time to analyze our student data!”

While the climate in these buildings may feel affirmative, the drawback is that an aversion to conflict circumvents the substantial work of schools. The issues are still present; they’re just ignored.

**AGGRESSIVE LEADERS**

Aggression, the second conflict leadership style, includes outright hostility in the form of raised voices, verbal threats, and bellicose gestures. We’re surprised how often we hear reports of faculty meetings deteriorating into shouting matches or the use of intimidation tactics. For example, a teacher reported, “I can’t believe the principal pulled me out of class to chastise me in the hallway.”

A second aggressive response to conflict is manipulative. School leaders have an array of tools at their disposal to boost alliances and repudiate dissent by positively reinforcing behavior they desire and wielding negative consequences when they disapprove. Institutional rewards and punishments include better (or worse) ratings on observation reports and annual reviews, awarding (or withholding) stipends for extracurricular activities, and preferential schedules, such as first period off (or the opposite).

Stacking committees is another coercive practice. Anticipating disputes in a curriculum committee, some leaders solicit membership solely representing their preferred point of view. It’s a power move, an aggressive act designed to silence alternative voices.

An aggressive response to conflict has the effect of suppressing discord, but disagreement rarely vanishes; instead, it seethes under the surface. Aggression provokes an emotional reaction: Resentments build, positions harden, and opportunities for constructive conversation are lost.

**ADDRESSING THE CONFLICT**

The constructive conflict management style is *addressing* conflict. While it’s widely assumed that conflict is a manifestation of dysfunctional organizations, we believe that conflict, when skillfully led, is a normal and healthy part of the school improvement process. After all, concerns can’t be addressed unless they are first aired. Rather than ignore or dismiss dissent, “conflict agile” leaders use disagreement as a window to better understand people’s reservations and the intensity of their emotions.

Beyond recognition and greater appreciation of everyone’s concerns, addressing conflict [generates better solutions](https://www.edutopia.org/article/using-conflict-avenue-change). There are a [wealth of strategies that leaders](https://www.edutopia.org/article/conflict-resolution-in-schools) may employ, including language (e.g., “Yes, and,” not “Yes, but”), protocols (e.g., “Trading Places,” in which each side assumes the other’s point of view), and the design thinking process to generate hard and soft data-based solutions specific to the organization’s needs.

The first step is to [develop a broad and empathetic understanding](https://www.edutopia.org/article/cognitive-biases-guide-school-administrators) of the underlying issues, followed by engaging in collaborative problem-solving that focuses foremost on addressing the deep concerns that energize the conflict. The collaboration then [builds consensus around agreed-upon assessment criteria](https://www.edutopia.org/article/conflict-management-schools) to continuously evaluate new practices and policies and then make adjustments accordingly.

Addressing conflict necessitates courage on the part of school leaders; it may initially feel more comfortable and less risky to avoid controversy or suppress opposition. Productively channeling conflict also requires patience, as the path from dissension to agreement is lengthy and fraught with obstacles.

Few educational leaders would dispute that divisive conflict is on the rise. At this critical juncture, which of the three As that leaders adopt—avoidance, aggression, or addressing conflict—can determine whether schools are able to alleviate tension in today’s environment, diminish knee-jerk resistance, and promote critical educational change.