1.5: Behavioral Approaches to Conflict

As mentioned, most people attempt to avoid conflict, but when faced with a dispute, most individuals approach the conflict in one of three basic behavioral styles: passive or nonassertive behavior, aggressive behavior, or assertive behavior.

1.5.1: "Behavioral Styles in Response to Conflict" (CC BY 4.0; J. Marteney)

Nonassertive or passive people ignore disputes in the hope that they will go away soon. They hope by their silence or non-involvement and that the dispute will "solve itself." Passivity is failing to express honest feelings, thoughts, and beliefs or expressing one's thoughts and feelings in such an apologetic, self-effacing manner that others can easily disregard what they have to say. The basic message of passivity is "My feelings don't matter - only yours do. My thoughts aren't important - yours are the only one's worth listening to. I'm nothing - you are superior." Passive people live in a Lose/Win situation. They lose while others win. The goal of passivity is to appease others and to avoid conflict at any cost.

In their book, LOOKING OUT/LOOKING IN, Adler and Towne write, "Non-assertion is the inability to express one’s thoughts or feelings when necessary because of a lack of confidence or skill or both." (Adler, 2002) Nonassertive people take no responsibility for conflict resolution because they do not see themselves as causal or active agents of positive change. Things happen to them over which they believe they have no control.¹

Nonassertive people may complain, but usually do nothing to gain control in their argumentative environment, because they fear they will lose from additional conflict encounters. For example, you go into a restaurant and order a steak...
dinner. You ask for the steak to be cooked medium, but when the meal is served, the steak is rare. Instead of sending the steak back, the nonassertive person will eat it (but not like it), pick at it, or let it sit. When asked by the server if everything is okay, the nonassertive person will respond by saying yes. The passive person does not want to risk engaging in conflict by complaining about the meal. Nonassertive people can rationalize that it was their fault the steak was served incorrectly; they must have not made their order clear; or that it is not important because they don’t have to come back to the restaurant again.

On the other end of the behavioral scale is the aggressive person.

**Aggressive** people directly stand up for what he or she believes by expressing thoughts, feelings, and beliefs in a way that is often dishonest, inappropriate, and violates the rights of others. The basic message of aggression is: **This is what I think - you're stupid for believing differently. This is what I want - what you want is not important. This is what I feel - your feelings don't count.** The goal of aggression is domination and winning, forcing the other person to lose. Winning is ensured by humiliating, degrading, belittling, or overpowering other people so that they become weaker or less able to express and defend their needs and rights.

Aggressive arguers see conflict from a win-lose perspective. Aggressive behavior usually involves reacting to a conflict situation by trying to overpower a person (opponent) through verbal abuse. They do not want to be on the losing end and will do anything to win. Aggressors may use name-calling and high intensity language to intimidate the other party. If the aggressor was served a meal he or she didn't like, he or she would call the server and verbally berate him or her for serving such a lousy meal.

Much aggressive conflict resolution is short-term and is achieved only at a high emotional cost to both parties. The response to an aggressive behavior is the desire for revenge. When someone has been aggressive towards us, we want to get back at that person. This can be by returning that aggressiveness. The aggressive person lives in a Win/Lose world where they seek the win and don’t care if you lose.

In between Aggressive and Non-Assertive or Passive behavior is Assertiveness.

**Assertive** is a combination of the two ends of the behavior spectrum. Assertiveness takes the ability to stand up for one’s position, but in a way that does not hurt the other person. The goal is long-term conflict resolutions. Here a person stands up for personal rights and expresses thoughts, feelings and beliefs in direct, honest, and appropriate ways that do not violate another person’s rights. The basic message of assertion is:

**This is what I think. This is what I feel. This is how I see the situation.** But it does not deny that the other people involved have a right to their point of view.

The goal of assertion is communication and mutuality; that is, to get and give respect, to ask for fair play, and to leave room for compromise, when the rights and needs of two persons’ conflict. Assertive people feel that they are active agents for change. As such, the assertive person wants to resolve conflict in a positive way by engaging in a conflict and argument. The assertive communicator's objective is to set up a win-win or no-lose approach to problem solving. The assertive approach seeks a long-term, cooperative resolution to any conflict situation.

If the assertive person is served a meal he or she didn't like, he or she would politely call over the server and explain that the meal was not prepared per the order. He or she would ask that another meal be served. The goal is to have an
enjoyable meal, not to hurt or make someone, like the server, feel bad.

In between the Aggressive and Assertive behavior is what we call, Indirect aggression. The behavior expresses hostility in obscure ways that usually cause more anger and conflict. Indirect aggression avoids direct confrontation. Instead, the individual will vent his or her anger at the other person in an indirect fashion.\(^2\) (Adler and Towne, 2002)

**Examples of Indirect Aggression**

- **Guiltmakers:** They make the other party feel guilty to get them to agree with their point of view.
- **Subject changers:** They avoid your topic in favor of one they can win.
- **Jokers:** They try to turn every argument into a laughing matter.
- **Blamers:** They believe conflict is always someone else’s fault.
- **Backstabbers:** They talk negatively about someone behind their back.
- **Withholders:** They refuse to reveal what they really feel or want.
- **Trappers:** They set verbal traps to create a fight they feel they can win.
- **Kitchen-sink fighters:** They throw everything into an argument, causing the argument to lose focus.

If an indirect aggressor was served a meal he or she did not like, he or she might leave no tip, or bad-mouth the restaurant to others by spreading rumors about the lack of quality in food preparation or service. The indirect aggressor hopes to get even with the restaurant for serving him a bad meal by discouraging others from going there.

In between the **Assertive** and **Nonassertive** behavior is what I call the “Whiner.” They have just enough confidence to complain. So, unlike the Nonassertive person, they don’t sit idly by and let things happen, they comment on them. They complain and hopefully find a sympathetic ear. Sounds like some of the posts you have seen on Facebook doesn’t it? But they are not Assertive enough to do anything about the problem or situation. They are still victims, but are hoping that their vocalization of their problem will encourage others to help them or at least console them.

Which conflict resolution style is best? Actually, there is no one best style. Each style may be appropriate or inappropriate to the goals of the argumentative situation. It would be an overstatement to say that the assertive style is always the best way to deal with conflict resolution. If the time is short, there is an emergency, and you are dealing with a dogmatic individual, then using an Aggressive style might be appropriate. In most situations, however, it is suggested that an Assertive approach should be the critical thinker’s first choice in responding to a conflict situation.

Critical thinkers have nothing to lose by trying the assertive approach first. If it fails, they can always move to a more aggressive conflict resolution stance. However, one of the drawbacks to no-lose conflict resolution is that the process usually requires a rational sender and a rational receiver. Without both, the assertive approach can be challenging.

Using assertive critical thinking methods requires not only your dedication to them, but also the cooperation of others engaged in the conflict. As Adler and Towne write, “Though you won’t always be able to gain your partner’s cooperation, a good job of selling can do the trick most of the time. If you listen sincerely, avoid evaluative attacks, and empathize with your partner’s concerns, you can boost the odds of getting your partner’s cooperation.”\(^3\)

For example, you have a neighbor who you feel endangers the lives of your small children by driving too fast. Your first approach should be to assertively ask him or her to drive slower. If the driver refuses and continues to drive fast, you
can become more aggressive. You can use direct aggression by verbally confronting the driver or you can use indirect aggression by anonymously reporting the driver to the authorities.

Think about how these approaches might be used in relationships.

1.5.2: "Conflict Resolution" (CC BY-SA 3.0; Nick Youngson via Alpha Stock Images)

Reference