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Conflict Management Part 4 – Conflict Management*By Scott E. Byorum, Nationwide Real Estate Tax Service, Inc.*

Two managers were fighting over the time of an expert employee. They went to the CEO to make their case, each arguing for the most hours the employee would spend in their department. The CEO looked thoughtful, then said to them: “Toss a coin. Whoever chooses heads can split the employee’s time. The one who chooses tails gets to choose the largest split.”

Let us say that you and I work together. It is only natural that given enough time, conflict will emerge between us. Conflict manifests as disagreement, maybe about how a certain aspect of the job is performed, how an issue is understood or that one of us feels slighted by the other. There are only a limited number of strategies and outcomes that can arise from this conflict, and we employ a certain strategy and accept the inevitable outcome based on three factors:

Issue: How important is this issue to me? How important is it to you? What principles and values are at stake?

Relationship: How important is our relationship with each other? How will this conflict impact other working relationships?

Power: What authority do I have in this conflict? What authority do you have? How far are you or I willing to push our authority to resolve the conflict the way we want it resolved.

The strategies we employ, and their corresponding outcomes, look like this:

Force = I Win & You Lose

This is where I exert my authority or badger the argument to resolve the conflict the way I see fit without regard for your stake in it. I may be under time constraints or the issue may be more important than the relationship. This is an aggressive stance and it is most often abused when a person has the authority to employ it.

Accommodation = I Lose & You Win

This is where I give up and let you have your way. The issue may not have importance to me, or it could be damaging our relationship if I press forward or I simply may not have the authority to resolve it or get my way. This is a passive stance, but it is also used as a passive aggressive tactic.

Avoidance = I Lose & You Lose

I just will not address the issue or do anything about it, no matter how many times you bring it up. I might be scared to delve into conflict, the issue may be overwhelming or a better solution or better time to address it may be on the horizon. Still, when avoidance is used legitimately, it should be accompanied by communication, so that all parties know when the issue will be addressed and resolved. Otherwise it is a passive tactic at best and a passive aggressive one at worst.

Compromise = I Lose/Win & You Lose/Win

This is where most conflicts tend to end up, especially if each party is entrenched in their positions but really desire an end to the conflict. It also comes about when neither party can exert authority over the other. It is the, “I will give up something to get something if you will do the same,” approach. Compromise can preserve relationships, but there is a danger that the true issue never gets fully resolved. It is often touted as an assertive approach, but more often than not it is passive aggressive, a combination of force and accommodation imposed on both parties.

Collaborate = I Win & You Win

The ultimate assertive tactic is for me to get everything I want and for you to get everything you want, issue resolved and relationships preserved. It is much harder than it sounds. Generally, collaboration has a little compromise in it and that compromise usually takes the form of time and resources. Example: “I will help you with your thing if you then help me with mine.” You both get what you want, but somebody usually gets theirs first. If this is the attitude employed by both parties to start out with, even if it ultimately cannot be attained, it shows a desire to preserve the relationship, resolve the issue in a mutually beneficial way and not employ power plays against each other.

Along with the three factors of issue importance, relationship standing and authority levels, there are other variables that affect strategies for conflict management, primarily time and resources. If these did not play into the occasion, collaboration would be the best approach and have the longest lasting results in every situation. But the longer a conflict is drawn out, the more resources it consumes and the greater the desire to resolve it grows. Every strategy has its place, time and appropriateness. The balancing act is to build and preserve trust while promoting the greatest amount of good between people and business.

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