

Introduction

This Toolkit is designed to be used by trainers, coaches and facilitators. Although it has the title of *Handling Difficult People and Difficult Situations*, it can also be used in the much wider context of improving people's interpersonal skills.

The Toolkit takes a holistic (whole-life) approach, starting with understanding yourself and others, coping with stress, enhancing communication skills and acting assertively, dealing with difficult people and dealing with difficult situations. The final section looks at how participants can re-frame their thinking process to improve their assertive skills and be more able to cope with difficult people and difficult situations they experience in the future.

Many years ago the subject matter of this Toolkit might have come under the 'interpersonal skills' banner. The authors believe that there is a great depth of material in this Toolkit and that trainers can use it for a variety of training and educational purposes. We have provided relevant background information on the topics and useful guides to using the material, so that trainers/facilitators can deliver training programmes with more understanding and confidence.

'Handling difficult people' clearly concerns nearly all of us and it is an important theme of this Toolkit that 'difficult people' may well have personality issues that make them difficult. On the other hand, people may only seem difficult because their personality clashes with our own; they are only difficult in our eyes and not necessarily in the eyes of others. Some people may be difficult because of the way we interact with them – in effect, we have created the difficulty in the first place. It is for these reasons that we have started off the Toolkit with information and activities on different personal styles, approaches to work, the different ways people cope with conflict and whether people are assertive, submissive or aggressive in their interpersonal style.

Questionnaires

Towards the beginning of the Toolkit we have devised several simple questionnaires to provide insights on personality, stress, dealing with conflict

and assertiveness. These questionnaires must be seen as giving clues about personality and the ways people respond to various situations. The questionnaires provide the participants with useful clues and insights to their own and other people's approaches to life and work. They have been devised from the authors' long experience of providing human skills training but have not been scientifically constructed and tested. They therefore do not have the same reliability or standing as professionally constructed questionnaires such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, the Belbin Team Role Inventory, the Strength Deployment Inventory, the 16 Personality Factor questionnaire, etc. Trainers/facilitators who are licensed to use these psychometric instruments may prefer to do so instead of using our questionnaires.

As with giving feedback to participants following any questionnaire (and especially questionnaires to do with personality and attitude), trainers/facilitators should do so in a relatively cautious, not to say tentative, manner. Questionnaires, inventories, personality/attitude tests and so forth yield only clues to personality or to the way people are likely to behave. Such questionnaires are largely self-reporting and may be influenced on the day by respondents' mood or recent experiences. Some of the results about which feedback is to be given may come as a surprise to the participants, and on hearing the feedback they may become defensive or need to spend time considering why they have come out the way they have.

In terms of this Toolkit, moreover, the whole programme is about how we deal with – and how we ought to deal with – difficult people and difficult situations and it would be a digression to spend too much time on personality assessment.

Workshops

The Toolkit has been written for those trainers, facilitators and coaches who want to design and run training programmes, or one-to-one coaching sessions. Suggestions for themed stand-alone workshops are strongly implied in the *Tool Matrix* on pages xv–xvi.

SECTION 2



Understanding others

Overview

Purpose of this Section

The purpose of this section is to help participants understand the types of behaviour people use at work, how people deal with conflict, and how orientation and attitude influence behaviour.

On completion of the activities, participants will be better able to:

- identify the strengths and possible weaknesses of different work styles.
- determine the stages people go through when dealing with conflict.
- assess people's orientation and attitude to work, and deal with their difficult behaviours.

Overview of Tools 5–7

Title of Tool	Purpose of Tool	Time
5 Evaluating approaches to work	To evaluate how work style influences behaviour at work	2hr 20min
6 Working with conflict	To recognise and use the four ways of dealing with conflict	2hr 10min
7 Succeeding with orientation and attitude	To understand how orientation and attitudes are formed and how to deal with the resulting difficult behaviours	2hr 40min



6 Working with conflict

Activity 1

Conflict sequence

People who have only one way of dealing with situations often find that they are unsuccessful in achieving their goals due to resistance from others. People who are willing to change their approaches that are not working are more flexible and more likely to be successful.

To determine your likely approaches to dealing with conflict, read the scenario below. In turn, read the instructions for each of the three situations and circle the capital letter next to the response that you are most likely to use.

Scenario

You believe you are good at your job but you experience a new colleague who strongly opposes the way you do your work. The colleague has confronted you and wants you to change your approach to the colleague's own approach.

Situation 1

From the following responses to the above scenario, select the one that you are most likely to use:

- A Tell the colleague he/she is wrong and that he/she should change his/her approach to match your approach because it works.
- B Listen to what he/she has to say and bargain with him/her to include elements of both approaches that might work well for you both.
- C Listen to his/her ideas and select some or all of them that you can use.
- D Listen to his/her ideas and say you will think about what he/she has said.

Situation 2

The approach you selected above has not worked to your satisfaction and the conflict has escalated. So now select a *different* approach to use:

- A Tell the colleague he/she is wrong and that he/she should change his/her approach to match your approach because it works.



- B Listen to what he/she has to say and bargain with him/her to include elements of both approaches that might work well for you both.
- C Listen to his/her ideas and select some or all of them that you can use.
- D Listen to his/her ideas and say you will think about what he/she has said.

Situation 3

Neither approach you selected above has worked to your satisfaction, and the conflict has escalated further. So now select one of the two remaining approaches to use:

- A Tell the colleague he/she is wrong and that he/she should change his/her approach to match your approach because it works.
- B Listen to what he/she has to say and bargain with him/her to include elements of both approaches that might work well for you both.
- C Listen to his/her ideas and select some or all of them that you can use.
- D Listen to his/her ideas and say you will think about what he/she has said.

Conflict sequence

For each Situation above, enter the capital letter you circled in the Response row of the table below, and enter the letter you did not select in the final column.

In the table, enter **Demand** as the conflict mode under Response A.

In the table, enter **Persuade** as the conflict mode under Response B.

In the table, enter **Concede** as the conflict mode under Response C.

In the table, enter **Withdraw/Ignore** as the conflict mode under Response D.

	Situation 1	Situation 2	Situation 3	
Response (A, B, C, D)				
Conflict mode				
Conflict sequence	1	2	3	4

The conflict sequence in the table above indicates your most likely sequence of approaches (conflict modes) to dealing with conflict situations.

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However, the nature of some conflict situations may cause you to respond in a different sequence. The better you can match the sequence to the situation, the more successful you will be in dealing with conflict.

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6 Working with conflict



Activity 2

Conflict scenarios

In the table below, enter the names of three people or situations that cause you conflict and describe the nature of the conflict.

	Person/Situation	Describe the conflict
1		
2		
3		

In the table below, indicate the conflict mode the other party is likely to use when you try to discuss the issue(s). Next, enter the sequence of your conflict modes you think will be most helpful in resolving the conflict.

	Other party's likely conflict mode	Your sequence of conflict modes to resolve the conflict
1		1 2 3 4
2		1 2 3 4
3		1 2 3 4

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6 Working with conflict

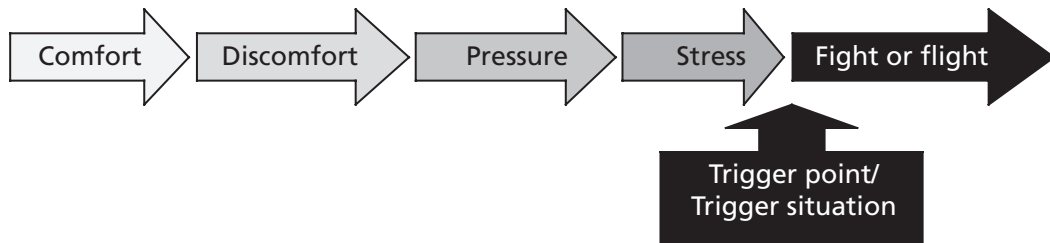
Handout 1

Initiating conflict

When things are going well for us, we are able to express ourselves confidently and use our natural skills and abilities. Normally, we make appropriate use of our rational thinking and our feelings and intuition to deal successfully with our day-to-day lives. However, when we find ourselves in conflict with other people, our rational thinking ability may be impaired and we are likely to react in emotional ways that are not fully thought through.

When under adverse pressure, subject to stress or faced with conflict, our alarm mechanisms are triggered and prepare us for a fight-or-flight response. Also, if the threat is overwhelming, such as when in the grip of fear, we may freeze and be unable to make any response.

Conflict may arise suddenly, but more often it is as a result of a situation that gradually deteriorates and eventually surfaces as conflict when a 'trigger-point' is reached or a 'trigger situation' occurs. As the situation moves from co-operation through disharmony to conflict, the emotional state of one or more of the parties involved is likely to progress through the following stages:



Once the trigger point/situation occurs, conflict has moved for one or all parties from covert discontent to overt action to remove or reduce the conflict, unless one or more parties concedes or withdraws.

When we move into conflict with people, it is likely to be for one or more of the following reasons:

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- our immediate goals (needs) are different
- our values (what is important to us in life) are different
- our approach to things (work style) is different.

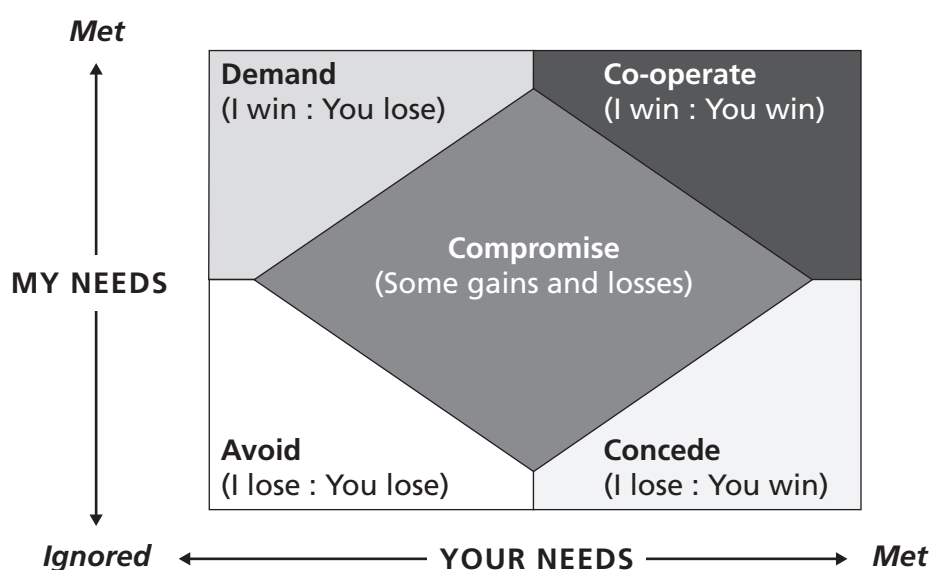
How we deal with the conflict will depend on how much we need to get our own way, our consideration for the other parties involved, and our skill in handling conflict situations.

People who are unskilled in handling conflict *react* in ways that seem appropriate to them in meeting their immediate needs and usually with no or little consideration for the other party's needs. Their response is usually unhelpful, emotive, and triggered by their body's alarm response system that bypasses or ignores their rational thinking processes.

People who are skilled in handling conflict *respond* by not displaying an immediate emotional reaction but by taking time to review the situation and then acting in a way that has been rationally and emotionally considered. Their response usually demonstrates understanding of the other party's needs, explains their own needs, and proposes ways forward that are likely to be acceptable to all parties.

Conflict modes

Conflict most often occurs when the needs of the parties are not being met in some way, and this leads to the following model of approaches to conflict:



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**Demand**

Demanding usually involves focusing only on your needs and ignoring the needs of the other parties. It is an 'I win and you lose' orientation. When being demanding, people stand up for their rights and strongly defend their position, giving little consideration to the arguments or position of others. In extreme cases, the behaviour is aggressive and whatever means necessary are used to win the day, with no concern for the consequences to the other parties. You are likely to choose a demanding mode when the outcome is important to you and maintaining ongoing positive relationships with the other parties is unimportant or accepted as a consequence of their compliance.

You should be aware that extreme demanding behaviour is only valid when the purpose is to protect the individual, other people and/or the environment.

Avoid

Avoiding involves *ignoring* or *withdrawing from* the situation and failing to deal with it. It is a 'lose-lose' orientation. All parties lose out because the issue has not been dealt with in a satisfactory way and is likely to resurface at a later date in a more serious form. You are likely to choose an avoiding mode when the conflict is too severe for you to address or when the conflict has little impact on you, or you consider it not worth the time and effort to use one of the other modes to resolve the issues.

Avoiding dealing with the issue in the short term is very often a valid approach, because it allows you to withdraw from the situation to take time to consider your options and strategy before entering back into the fray.

Concede

Conceding involves giving in to the other parties' demands or requests and receiving little or nothing in return. It is an 'I lose and you win' orientation. In extreme cases it involves giving in totally to the other parties and letting them have their way completely. Your own needs and concerns are not properly considered and your conceding behaviour usually involves a degree of self-sacrifice. The main problem with conceding behaviour is that it sets a precedent, and the next time conflict is experienced with the other parties, they will expect you to concede again.



Conceding behaviour is often used by people who consider that maintaining harmony is more important to them than having their own needs met.

Compromise

Compromising involves an element of trading, by which you give up some of the things you want if the other parties will reciprocate. It is a 'gains and losses' orientation. It usually involves finding a mutually acceptable position for all parties. Compromising behaviour usually leads to workable, if not ideal, solutions. You are likely to choose a compromising mode when you need a workable solution to the issue, and it is not worth the additional time and effort to obtain a more effective co-operative solution.

Compromise is often the best outcome that can be expected in a conflict situation, especially where the goals (needs) of the parties are different, such as a supplier wanting to maximise its profit and a buyer wanting to minimise its expenditure.

Co-operate

Co-operating involves a high degree of appreciation by all parties of the needs of the other parties. It is an 'I win and you win' orientation. It requires taking time to explore and appreciate the concerns and needs of all parties.

Co-operating leads to greater insights into the issues involved and often leads to a more creative, effective and satisfactory solution than the other conflict modes can offer. You are likely to choose a co-operative mode when it is important for the outcome to be ideal for all parties and the additional time, effort and skills needed to achieve it are worthwhile. Co-operative approaches are usually sought when there is an intention for a long-term and mutually beneficial arrangement.

To be effective, co-operating requires the skills of listening, questioning, demonstrating empathy, building rapport, giving some concessions and a willingness to work together in a mutually beneficial way.



6 Working with conflict

Handout 2

Conflict sequence

The *work styles* of Controller, Influencer, Supporter, Analyser and Transformer each have their preferred ways of working that are comfortable for them.

The **Controller** likes a challenge and may view conflict as an opportunity to test his or her assertiveness.

The **Influencer** likes variety and action, and may view conflict as an opportunity to practise his or her skills of persuasion.

The **Supporter** likes harmony and may view conflict as destructive and debilitating.

The **Analyser** likes structure and quality and may view conflict as an unnecessary waste of effort and resources.

The **Transformer** likes a productive and congenial work environment and may view conflict as an inevitable part of working life that must be dealt with quickly and effectively.

The four ways of dealing with the conflict (*conflict modes*) are:

Demand – The Controller will often start with this approach by insisting that the other parties concede to his/her wishes or the consequences may be severe for the other parties.

Persuade – The Influencer will often start with this approach and will use his/her charm and considerable communication skills to persuade the other parties to concede, co-operate or compromise.

Concede – The Supporter will often start with this approach because the cost of the conflict is not worth the damage that might be inflicted on relationships and the harmony of the team or teams.

Withdraw/Ignore – The Analyser will often start with this approach, so that he/she can plan strategy and tactics prior to re-engaging the other parties. His/her strategy will usually be well thought through and hard to argue against

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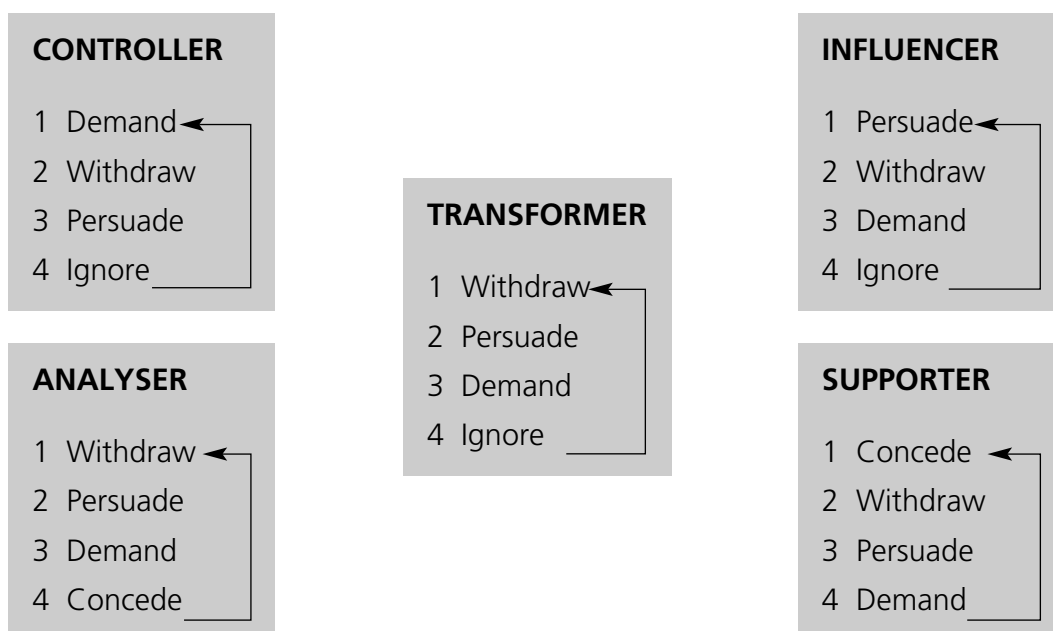
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on a rational basis. The problem for Analysers is that the other parties are most likely to be in the grip of their emotions when in conflict and rational argument is often discounted.

The Transformer may start with any of the above approaches depending on his/her assessment of the approach most likely to succeed initially.

If the initial approach to dealing with the conflict is unsuccessful, another conflict mode may be selected and put into action. In fact, all the five work styles are capable of using all the conflict modes and there is a probable sequence in which strong examples of the work styles employ the modes. Typically, they will employ the modes as follows:



A strong **Controller** will usually demand compliance. If this does not work, he/she will withdraw to consider another approach and will usually try a more persuasive style next. If this fails, he/she is likely to ignore the conflict as much as possible and continue with his/her own independent course of action, or will try demanding behaviour again.

A strong **Influencer** will usually try a persuasive approach, being willing to cooperate by making small concessions. If this does not work, he/she is likely to withdraw to consider a strategy and then put it forward in a more assertive or demanding way. If this fails, he/she is likely to ignore the conflict as much as

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possible, or will try persuasive behaviour again but being willing to compromise with further concessions.

A strong **Supporter** will usually concede to the wishes of the other parties as much as possible. If his/her initial concessions prove unsatisfactory, he/she will withdraw to consider how he/she may develop more persuasive arguments to win a fairer deal. If this does not work and the issues are very important to him/her, he/she may become obstinate and demand that his/her minimum needs are met. If this fails, he/she will concede but withdraw all willing co-operation.

A strong **Analyser** will usually withdraw to consider the situation and develop a logical strategy to persuade the other parties of the correctness of his/her approach. If this does not work, he/she is likely to demand reasons why the approach is not acceptable and will attempt to refute objections. If this fails, he/she will reluctantly concede and may also start to consider another strategy.

A strong **Transformer** will usually want to withdraw to consider all the factors of the conflict before deciding on the approach that has the best chance of success. He/she will normally use a persuasive style with the selected approach and be willing to compromise to remove or reduce the conflict. If this does not work and the issues are important to him/her, he/she will become more assertive and may demand compliance, especially if the issues are adversely affecting other people. If this fails, he/she is likely to ignore the conflict as much as possible, continuing in ways that are best for the team, and may also continue to seek a strategy that will alleviate the conflict.

6 Working with conflict



Handout 3

Evaluation of learning

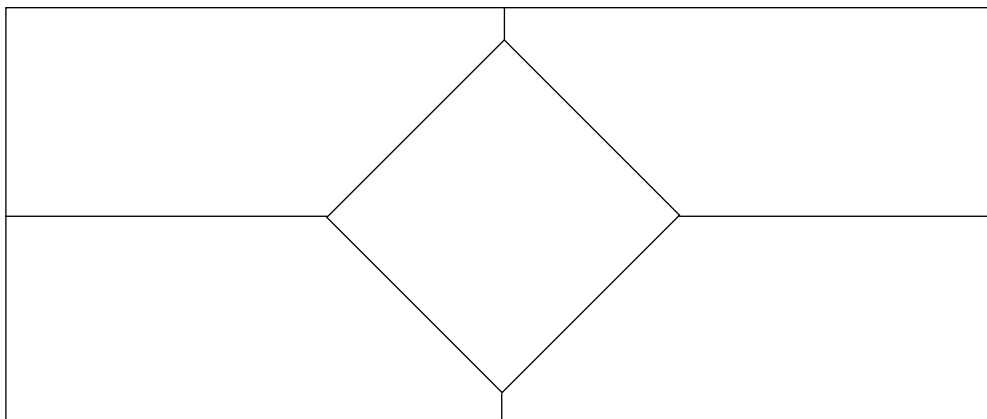
- 1 List the five emotional states leading towards conflict.

1	2
3	
4	5

- 2 List the three main reasons why people come to be in conflict.

1
2
3

- 3 Complete the Conflict modes model.



- 4 List your most likely conflict mode sequence, and note the reasons for it.

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6 Working with conflict

Handout 4

Follow-up activities

Make a list of the people with whom you are experiencing conflict. For each person, add the conflict sequence you think they use. Consider how you can respond to their conflict sequence to reduce the conflict and achieve your goals while at the same time retaining their co-operation.

Person	Conflict sequence	Response to conflict sequence

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