



Dear Dr. Mazie,

I seem to be facing conflict in every aspect of my life. Lately, I have been struggling with a coworker who has everyone at work on edge. This has left me feeling anxious, and now I worry about potential conflict every time I knock on a landowner's door. And to compound my work issues, I have two teenagers at home who are desperately seeking their independence. I need help!

– Steve in Detroit

I think you speak for the majority of us – conflict is everywhere. And as right of way professionals, we are bound to face potential conflicts since so many of our projects require us to interact with other people, not to mention their property.

In general, there are many difficult people in this world. Much too often, they are our family members and coworkers. So what can we do to handle the discord appropriately? What are the options in dealing with so many different people in so many different settings?

Let's start with a few facts:

- Conflict is natural, inevitable and a part of daily living.
- Conflict can be functional or dysfunctional – depending on how you handle it.
- One party must decide how to handle conflict in a functional manner and take control of what is called the communication climate.

The fact is, we can never really control another person. Without that ability, getting the desired results isn't easy. However, there is an opportunity to change the communication climate from a negative one into a positive one. It just takes some skills and a bit of practice. Knowing the basics is a good place to start.

Any seasoned right of way professional will tell you that understanding the basics of communication are essential to good landowner relationships and effectiveness

during the negotiation process. They'll also tell you that it takes a lot of practice to get there.

So let's take a look at the different conflict management styles. See if you can identify which style sounds like yours, and then see if you can detect the styles for some of the other people in your life.

Avoidance

This is a denial or withdrawn orientation showing an indifference to the concerns of both yourself and the other person. The idea is to get rid of the conflict and pretend it doesn't exist. It is a Lose-Lose Style.

Accommodating

This is an appeasement or smoothing-over orientation where cooperating is at the expense of your own personal goals. It is a people-pleasing, "nice people don't fight" syndrome where harmony is more important than self or values. It is a Lose-Win Style.

Competing

A domination orientation, this style is designed to satisfy your own needs at the expense of the other person. It is utilized by those who must win at any cost. It's a Win-Lose Style.

Compromising

It sounds good and healthy, but it actually ranks in second place as far as the preferred way to handle conflicts. Compromising is a sharing orientation designed to satisfy both your own and the other person's needs to some extent. The objective is to gain something by giving up something. It's a Lose-Lose Style.

Problem Solving

This is a consensus or collaboration orientation utilized to fully satisfy the concerns of yourself and the other person. It is definitely the most difficult of all the styles and demands highly-developed skills. If you know someone who has mastered the role of a right of way agent, you can be assured that this Win-Win style has become second nature.

Obviously, we would all like to be an expert at attaining a win-win outcome. Knowing we have handled a situation in a functional and healthy manner gives us a good feeling about ourselves and enhances our productivity. Just know that your batting average for managing these situations will greatly improve over time – with practice.

There is so much more that can be said about conflict management. In fact, IRWA offers an excellent one-day course! Conflict Management, Course 213, delves deeper into the different styles, outlining when each one can be appropriately used, and how to best strategize so that you can take control of a situation gone wrong. The basics I've given provide a good starting point, however I urge you to take a class, study and learn.

A nationally recognized speaker, workshop leader and trainer, Dr. Mazie Leftwich, Psy.D has a clinical background in applied psychology with expertise in organizational and personal development. She is Senior Vice President of Contract Land Staff, LLC, where she oversees training and team excellence programs.