

The ICSI: Conflict Styles and Intercultural Competence  
Solving Problems and Resolving Conflicts Across the Cultural Divide

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Why Conflict Styles?

- We all experience disagreements, conflicts and problems.
- We have different styles for dealing with them.
- We LEARN our styles from our home cultures.
- Important to know your Conflict Style and those of others.

In order to:

- Resolve disagreements and conflicts across cultures
- For mutual understanding, harmony and productivity
- Facilitate problem solving
- Reduce judgmental attitudes
- Manage stress
- Avoid conflict
- For better communication (accurate & effective) to lessen misinterpretation
- Build personal relationships
- For effective teamwork
- Assist mediation

Knowing one's Conflict Style helps build Intercultural Competence:

- By acknowledging and supporting cultural differences (rather than suppress them)
- By enabling cultural differences to become assets to performance (not obstacles)

How? > perspective, knowledge & behavior

- Perspective shifts, i.e., the capacity to shift cultural perspective.
- Knowledge and awareness (of self and other) in terms of commonalities and difference. Understanding self and the experiences of people from different cultural communities—their perceptions, values, beliefs, behavior and practices.
  - By eliminating stereotypes (evaluative overgeneralizations of personal traits assigned to groups)
  - By increasing interpretation skills based on **cultural generalization frameworks**-neutral/general descriptions of a group's preferences.
- Behavior shifts—adapt or bridge behavior to cultural commonality and difference.

Rationale: Conflict Styles are a core **cultural generalization framework**.

Cultural generalizations (e.g., Individualist vs Collective // High vs. Low Context) support complex perceptions and experience of commonality and difference.

- Direct/Indirect = central cultural dimensions for dealing with disagreement across cultures (shown by research on Individualism/Collectivism & High/Low Context cultural generalization frameworks).
- Emotional expressiveness & restraint = fundamental variable dimensions of cultural difference in conflict style (shown by research).

ICSI is based on our “preferred” stance in stress, i.e., what we would do if no negative consequences--NOT on what we “should” do. Where we are comfortable under stress.

What is Conflict?

- Individual Level: disagreements with family & friends, co-workers & strangers, over simple to complex issues
- Community and International level: hostages, terrorists, wars

Conflict involves two elements (disagreements & emotion)

- Perceived, substantial disagreements (my goals blocked by yours)
- Emotional reaction:
  - Perceived interference increases stress, anxiety, anger, fear. “I believe that you are taking actions that compromise my goals.”
  - Relationship with others is threatened
  - Tension increases when self-identity (face) threatened
  - We fall back to primary *culturally appropriated* mode for dealing with conflict

Approach to conflict is Patterned & Culturally grounded:

Patterned:

- Conflict style is one of many interaction styles used for communication that are learned patterns for expressing disagreements and emotion
- Differences in styles tend to escalate tensions

Learned:

- Conflict styles are the specific attitudes, knowledge, behavior, interpretive frameworks & strategies for defining and responding to conflict.
- Learned through our primary socialization in family/culture/ethnic group.
- Can be changed over time based on experience in different cultures.

Definition: “Intercultural Conflict Style” is a culture group’s manner for dealing with disagreements and communicating emotion.

- Some are more explicit and direct; others indirect
- Some express emotion more overtly; others more restrained
- Variations provide basis for different intercultural conflict styles
- Different styles lead to different strategies

Mitchell Hammer’s Model: Direct/Indirect & Emotionally restrained/ expressive

Aim: greater self-awareness of our own style and its roots leads to greater insight into ways other cultures deal with conflict and provide a platform for recognizing cultural difference and thereby enhance one’s overall cultural competence in resolving disagreements—critical for our age.

The Two Fundamental Cultural Differences in Conflict Styles:

- How we express disagreements (direct/indirect) around problems and issues
- How we express emotion (restrained/expressive) around problems and issues

Discussion Question 1: How would you personally FEEL if you had a disagreement or conflict with another person and that individual did not want to directly discuss the situation or problem with you?

Uncomfortable 1 2 3 4 5 6 Comfortable

Discussion Question 2: How would you personally FEEL expressing strong emotions such as anger during a disagreement or conflict?

Uncomfortable 1 2 3 4 5 6 Comfortable

What do YOU think?

If you were upset at work would you express your feelings openly (1) or Not openly (2)

Openly 1 ----- 2 Not Openly

Percentage of persons who WOULD NOT EXPRESS OPENLY:



## *Intercultural Conflict Styles*

<p><b>Direct</b></p> <p>How we Express Disagreement</p>	Discussion Style	Engagement Style
	Accommodation Style	Dynamic Style
<p><b>Indirect</b></p>	How we Express Emotion	
	<b>Restraint</b>	<b>Expressiveness</b>

### Discussion Style:

verbally direct, emotionally restrained, precise language: “say what you mean and mean what you say.” Intense emotion is dangerous and inhibits resolution. Talking directly is a comfortable approach. Discussion must be based in objective “facts” not feelings.

Engagement Style: verbally direct and confrontative; emotionally expressive. Sincerity demonstrated by intense verbal and nonverbal expression of emotion. Comfortable with personal confrontation between parties. Emotion is put on the table!

Accommodation Style: emphasizes indirect approach and emotional restraint, controlled manner. Emphasizes ambiguity and circumlocution to contain the conflict. Emotional calm and reserve is maintained to build interpersonal harmony and counter harmful disagreement. Intense expression of emotion is dangerous and hinders resolution. Indirect speech, stories, metaphors and reliance on third parties are essential.

Dynamic Style: indirect strategies with more emotionally intense expression. Hyperbole, repetition and associative argument using ambiguity, stories, metaphors, humor and third parties.

More emotional confrontational discourse and expression. Credibility requires expressiveness.

Direct/Indirect Approaches typified in Proverbs:

- “Nothing done with intelligence is done without speech” -Greek proverb
- “Hear one and understand ten” –Japanese Proverb
- “Say what you mean and mean what you say” -American proverb
- “It is good to know the truth, but it is better to speak of palm trees” –Arab proverb

Direct Culture Strategies

- Meaning inside verbal message
- Precise, explicit use of language
- Reliance on face-to-face resolution
- Speaking your mind
- Verbally assert difs of opinion
- Persuasion through reason-argument
- Rely more on objective & explicit information
- Rely more on verbal & written communications
- Go straight to the point in discussion
- Problem/solution (task) orientation

Indirect Culture Strategies

- Meaning outside verbal message
- Ambiguity, vagueness in language
- Reliance on third party for resolution
- Discretion in voicing goals
- “Talk around” differences of opinion
- Persuasion through “facework”
- Rely on contextual, internalized understanding of information
- Rely less on verbal & written communication, more on context
- Hint, suggest main point
- Relationship repair orientation

Emotionally restrained/expressive orientations typified in Proverbs:

- “The first to raise their voice loses the argument” --Chinese proverb
- “What is nearest the heart is nearest the mouth --Irish Proverb
- “After a storm, fair weather; after sorrow, joy” --Russian proverb
- “Silence produces peace, and peace produces safety” --Swahili proverb

#### Emotionally Restrained Strategies

- Disguised emotion; Minimal nonverbal, vocal displays of emotions
- Control emotions by “internalizing” (restraining expression)
- Restrained emotions allow focus on task achievement and productive working relations
- Humor risky as tension regulator
- Sensitivity to being “too emotional” & hurting the feelings of others
- Emotional suppression needed for credibility & conflict de-escalation
- Trust developed through emotional control
- Personally less involved, cool & self-contained conduct is admired

#### Emotionally Expressive Strategies

- Overt display of emotion; nonverbal, vocal expressions of emotions
- Control emotions by “externalizing” (visible display of feelings)
- Expressed emotions allow authentic focus on task achievement & productive working relations
- Humor used as tension regulator
- Sensitivity to being asked to “calm down” & being “emotionally present”
- Emotional information needed for credibility & conflict de-escalation
- Trust developed through emotional commitment
- Personally involved, vital, & animated emotional expressions admired

Self-perceived strengths

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>DISCUSSION</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Confronts problems</li> <li>• Elaborates arguments</li> <li>• Maintains calm atmosphere</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>ENGAGEMENT</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provides detailed explanations, instructions &amp; information</li> <li>• Expresses opinions</li> <li>• Shows feeling</li> </ul>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>ADAPTATION</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Considers alternative meanings to ambiguous messages</li> <li>• Able to control emotional outbursts</li> <li>• Sensitive to feelings of the other party</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>DYNAMIC</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Uses third parties to gather information and resolve conflicts</li> <li>• Skilled at observing changes in nonverbal behavior</li> <li>• Comfortable with strong emotions</li> </ul>

Weaknesses as perceived by other styles

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>DISCUSSION</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Difficulty reading “between the lines”</li> <li>• Appears logical but unfeeling</li> <li>• Appears uncomfortable with emotional arguments</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>ENGAGEMENT</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Appears unconcerned with the views &amp; feelings of others</li> <li>• Appears dominating &amp; rude</li> <li>• Appears uncomfortable with viewpoints that are separated from emotion</li> </ul>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>ADAPTATION</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Difficulty in voicing own opinion</li> <li>• Appears uncommitted &amp; dishonest</li> <li>• Difficulty in providing elaborated explanations</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>DYNAMIC</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rarely “gets to the point”</li> <li>• Appears unreasonable &amp; devious</li> <li>• Appears “too emotional”</li> </ul>

## Examples of Styles

<p>DISCUSSION N. Europe White America Canada</p>	<p>ENGAGEMENT African American Russia Greece</p>
<p>Latin America Am Indians</p>	<p>India Africa</p>
<p>ADAPTATION Japan Southeast Asia Mexico</p>	<p>DYNAMIC Arab Countries</p>

## Impact of ICS Model &amp; Inventory

## Individual level:

- Aids individual development
- Improves management competence
- Applies across wide range of situations—family relations, mediating, counseling, attorney-client relations, crisis management
- Cultural emphasis may or may not be needed

## Team/group level:

- Aids individual contributions to team goals
- Helps team leaders provide more effective, intercultural leadership
- Improves team relations and accomplishment of group goals

## Organizational level:

- Aids organizational diversity goals by increasing inclusiveness of different conflict and problem solving styles
- Provides “base-line” assessment of the organization’s cultural conflict/problem solving style



### Breakout Groups

Divide into small groups with mix of intercultural conflict styles.

Share profiles & discuss:

1. How do differences in intercultural conflict styles impact our mission *ad intra* and *ad extra*?  
In the workplace and at home?

See: “*Strengths and weaknesses*” section in the *ICSI Interpretive Guide* (page 13)

See: Hans Küng’s characterization of the Church. What *style* is Church culture?

2. How similar or different is your conflict style to others in your cultural community?

See: “*Cultural patterns across conflict styles*” in the *ICS Interpretive Guide* (pages 14-15)

3. Identify three insights your group can share with the large group.

How could this be used in your organization?

### Conflict Role-Play

Divide into four groups, based on your individual conflict resolution style identified in the Intercultural Conflict Style Inventory. Thus, groups should consist of “Discussion” styles, “Engagement” styles, “Accommodation” styles, and “Dynamic” styles.

Discuss conflicts you have experienced. Each group choose an “interesting” conflict.

Then each group develop a brief role-play that demonstrates *how this conflict can be effectively resolved from* the group’s preferred conflict style (e.g., Discussion, Engagement, Accommodation, Dynamic), i.e., how might this conflict be resolved if the disputants were *all from* an Engagement style, or a Discussion style, or an Accommodation style, or a Dynamic style?