



Adaptive Leadership for Public Health Podcast Series

Episode #4: Managing Conflict

Hello everyone, and welcome to Adaptive Leadership for Public Health, a podcast created to help you address the complex challenges of public health leadership by growing and thriving as an adaptive leader. This podcast is sponsored by the Region IV Public Health Training Center at Emory University.

My name is Brandy Walker and I am faculty at the J.W. Fanning Institute for Leadership Development, a unit of Public Service and Outreach at the University of Georgia. I'll be your host as we explore various aspects of adaptive leadership through our podcast. Today's episode is about the importance of managing conflict in adaptive leadership.

In this episode I'll start with some conflict myth busting, then I'll share some strategies for using various conflict styles, and end with my favorite part, which is a little glimpse into how our brains work in conflict, leaving you with the SCARF model. That may not mean anything to you yet, but just wait—all will be revealed, and you will see that you use that SCARF every day!

So before we dig in, let me ask you to do a little word association.

What are the first three words that come to your mind when I say...CONFLICT. Quick—don't think, just blurt out those words.

Now, if you are like most people, you thought of or shouted out words that probably don't make you feel warm and fuzzy. Maybe you even raised your shoulders a bit in a stress pose and had your pulse quicken. In general, most people see conflict as something that comes with negative words, like angry, stress, tension, struggle, battle, anxiety, fight, confront, frustration, hurt. Maybe you thought of words with a little more hope like resolution, win, or mediation. Or maybe words like, management, differences, and unavoidable.

I'd like to start us off by busting the myth that conflict is always bad. In fact, I'd like to suggest to you that our first step to managing conflict as adaptive leaders is to see conflict as a natural and essential part of life that can be the source of energy and creativity. Now this isn't to say that we go out of our way to look for conflict.

Conflict is part of life and we don't have the choice of never experiencing it, but it is also at the heart of adaptive leadership practices. When you are faced with adaptive challenges, you have to consider multiple perspectives, new learning needs to happen, behaviors and attitudes need to change, and change often creates a sense of loss, which can trigger resistance in stakeholders. All of that can create conflict.

And just because we busted the myth that conflict is always bad, that doesn't mean it's always good either. It's important that the adaptive leader can diagnose the type of conflict as one that has the potential to be good or bad. That good conflict is going to help produce new ideas, solve continuous problems, allow for creativity, and give people opportunities to expand their skills, ultimately improving performance. Think about a challenging time when you've been faced with uncertainty and the need to pivot, rethink the way things are being done, and come up with new solutions—any of that sound familiar? Such challenges force us to learn new skills, and can be accompanied by a great deal of creativity and new approaches that emerge as a good thing. Of course, there is bad conflict, and if you pay close attention to your teams and see that the team energy or moral is getting dangerously low, productivity is being reduced, the conflict is preventing job accomplishment, creating destructive behaviors, and ultimately fostering poor performance, then you have the bad conflict on your hands.

Part of what it means to be an adaptive leader is to know how recognize when conflict is getting into the unproductive zone, and to 'cook the conflict' accordingly. 'Cooking the Conflict' is a metaphor taken from adaptive leadership theory that treats conflict as something that we can manage and use to foster creativity and energy around problems that may need to be solved in new ways. It isn't always one thing, but is contextual and requires different approach for different contexts, like cooking different dishes. You don't want to overcook or undercook, so when things are too 'hot' you may want to turn down the heat, but there are times when you want to turn up the heat so the outcome is done and fits the circumstances. There are two major considerations for the adaptive leader when faced with conflict—the first is foundational, and it is, have you created a safe enough space for people in your teams to deal with high-temperature conflicts without getting burned? And the second is, recognizing when to adjust the conflict thermostat to get the best results.

So what does that mean? Well, if you rush in to stop conflict the moment you sense things heating up, you could be stifling a new creative solution to a problem that may need to get out into the open. Or you may be shutting off some energy to think differently and productively work through one of those continuous problems that keep occurring. On the flip side, if you see a conflict fire burning out of control and you don't step in with a cooler demeanor to slow things down, you may be looking at some destruction that is not productive.

A good leader will be able to help their teams push through and embrace the energy and creativity from good conflict, and pull back to regroup and refresh when the conflict is pushing the team into exhaustion. It's not always easy to diagnose where your teams are, so start by building trust, strengthening relationships, and checking in often to watch for signs of overheating. And again, it's critical that you work to create that safe space where your team members and stakeholders can come to you with concerns.

Now, let's talk about common conflict styles. There is a lot of information about to come your way, so listen up and pause as needed. As you listen to these, think about what your go-to style is, what style you're not as comfortable with or that you avoid using all together.

The best way to approach conflict is to have a variety of options to choose from, so you can fit your style with the circumstances. I'm going to share with you 5 common conflict styles that are based on the foundational research of Thomas and Killman from back in the 1970s. These 5 styles are forcing, also called directing or competing, which is when you get your way over everyone else. Then we have the avoiding where you walk away or don't engage, then we have accommodating, which is when you let the other party 'win' or have their way. Then collaborating which is when everyone needs to win and get what they want, and in the middle of it all is compromise which is where everyone gets something but also gives up something to resolve the conflict.

If you think of a recent or common conflict in your work, you should be able to identify your response in one of those 5 categories. Now, as you think about why you would choose one over the other, consider two factors—how important is it that I am right, and how important is the relationship to me in this conflict? The key is to be very strategic and intentional about choosing the right style to address each conflict you face.

Let's take the most aggressive of responses first—the forcing or directing/competing style. If being right is more important than the relationship, then go for this style Think of emergencies where quick and decisive action is needed. This is a great choice when an unpopular action needs implementing, like cost cutting, enforcing unpopular rules, or discipline. Think of this as the “ripping the band-aid off” style. If it's better to act quickly and decisively because it's the right thing to do, then do it.

But, this style can cause more harm than good if used in a situation where “winning at all costs” results in harm to people or the organization. If the personal relationship is more important than the issue at stake, then using this style could strain the relationship, leading to resentment and retaliation. Forcing is also a bad conflict style to choose when it causes intimidation, which inhibits important communication, discussion of alternative ideas and attempts at problem solving. A leader who constantly uses this style to resolve conflict in teams is not creating an environment for creativity and energy to emerge from team members.

Now let's take the least aggressive and also least concerned with relationships—the avoiding style. This is a great approach to adopt when an issue is trivial or something else is more deserving of your attention; if you have no chance of winning; or if resolution is more important than confrontation. Avoiding is a good choice when the issue is tangential or symptomatic of other issues. And it's a great choice when people need to cool down and regain perspective. In this case, you're not avoiding forever, but temporarily. When this happens, it's important to let

the other person know you plan on coming back to the issue so they don't interpret your avoidance as abandoning.

However, avoiding can be a very bad choice if your input is really needed, and choosing to avoid actually contributes to the problem and prevents it from being resolved. Avoiding can make the conflict worse if you are perceived as not caring about the relationship. It's also a bad idea if you're using it as a passive-aggressive or unproductive "delaying" tactic. If you're sitting back, knowing you have a solution, but purposefully withholding it to "show them", then you're probably making it worse. So avoid when it's helping, but don't if it's not.

Moving along to accommodating, this is a style that is more concerned with the relationships involved than being right. Many people have a negative view of this approach because it may seem weak to 'give in' to others, but it can be very powerful and effective in conflict management if used in the right way and for the right reasons. Choose this style if it is important to you that you satisfy others to maintain cooperation. This is effective when what you're giving into isn't all that important, but the cooperation and relationship is. It is also a way to allow a better position to be heard, to learn, and to show your reasonableness. This can be a big step for a leader to let go of that control and let someone else have the spotlight, and it can result in great gains for you and your teams. Using the accommodating conflict style is a great way of building social credits for later issues. If something seems more important to the other person and not so much to you, giving in helps that person see you as an ally that later can benefit you when something is more important to you than them.

However, accommodating can be a bad choice if the outcome is not acceptable or fair to you, and it makes you feel (or you are being perceived) as a "doormat." This can lead to feelings of resentment, inadequacy and loss of respect from yourself and others. If this happens, people may begin to take advantage of you. So, if the accommodating style is building up social credits, it's great, but if it's building up resentment, then it's not so great.

Remember, the more you switch your styles up so you're responding with the right style for the right situation, the less likely these negative situations will occur. And, you can also move from one style to another if you find that you're not getting the desired result.

Let's look at collaborating next. Now the word collaboration is very popular these days—we all want to collaborate and be seen as collaborative. But, it is not always the best conflict style to use. It depends on...what? The situation.

It is a great style to start with when all voices need to be heard. For example, when it's important to find an integrative solution because concerns are too important to be compromised, or when you need to merge insights from people with different perspectives. Collaboration is a great style to use when you want to maintain commitment from all parties

through consensus. And if it's great to use if you need to work through feelings that have interfered with a relationship. This may sound like it applies to personal relationships only, but emotions can run high in professional team settings and in the community-engaged work that you do in public health, so be sure that you consider the relationships that you build in the work you do internally and externally.

Now, collaboration takes a great deal of time, energy, and effort, so it is a very bad choice when you simply don't have a lot of time, energy, and effort.

It can cause more harm than good if you find that you are spending too much time on trivial matters, or you are diverting or wasting resources.

Ultimately, if you find that there may not **be** a solution that provides satisfaction for all parties involved, you may need to switch to a different conflict style.

Often, people find they turn to the middle-of-the road option, which is compromise. Here, everyone wins something, but, everyone also loses something. It *can* be a great option when you need a backup when collaboration or competition is unsuccessful. Or when the goals are important, but not worth the effort or potential disruption of more assertive modes. Compromise also works well if both parties are equally committed and won't budge. And compromise works really well when it's more important to achieve temporary settlements to complex issues or to arrive at expedient solutions under time pressure.

BUT, it can make the conflict worse if you by choosing to compromise, you lose sight of long-term goals. If it leads to a lack of trust or the creation of a cynical environment, or if you are viewed as having no firm values, then compromise is not your friend. Be careful of the perception or the reality that you are making concessions to keep people happy without resolving the original conflict.

So, the takeaway with conflict styles is that you should have access to all of these styles, and make strategic and intentional choices on how to respond or how to adjust your response. Those choices should be based on the importance of you being right, the importance of the relationships, and the style that is going to best allow for the best resolution for the circumstances.

Now, let's turn to what happens when our brains face a conflict that produces a threat response—facing a threat limits our ability to be rational, strategic, and intentional. This model I'm going to share with you, the SCARF model, is going to turn on a lightbulb in your head, and you're going to see SCARF everywhere, so get ready. This is based on the research of David Rock so if you search SCARF and David Rock you'll find the original articles that he's written on this model. His work starts from the premise that our brains are wired to minimize threat and maximize rewards. We all know that when faced with physical threats the logical parts of our

brains shut down and our instincts take over with the fight, flight, or freeze responses. The SCARF model states that we have very similar responses to social and relational threats. In other words, when we are faced with situations that threaten us in social and relational ways, our rational brains that allow us to think through the problem facing us and make logical choices takes a back seat to the instinctual part of our brains, what we might call our lizard brain, which causes the fight, flee, or freeze response to kick in. Now the thing I like most about this model is that it applies to all of us—that is all of us with neurotypical or “normal” brains, so it’s actually the result of our brains working properly. But, we can also use this model to help us make better choices to prevent unnecessary conflict, to understand conflict when it does occur, and to help explain our own actions when we are part of the conflict.

Ok, it’s time I tell you what SCARF stands for: the letters stand for the 5 relational and social domains that, when threatened, can cause our lizard brains to take over. Conversely, when we reward these relational and social domains, our lizard brain calms down and lets our rational brain take over.

The “S” stands for Status. Status refers to your relative importance to others. This doesn’t mean our positional status like president or CEO, but our status as a valuable human being. We may feel insecure if we feel like we are seen as holding less status than someone else, in such a situation we may feel threatened. But this also refers to a kind of illogical rage that can come from seemingly simple situations like when someone cuts in front of you in line, or on the roadway. Think about the expression “road rage.” Now I’m not talking about any actual threat violence, but think about this scenario: you’re waiting on a parking space, and someone just zips right in and steals it from you. What’s going on in your mind? Maybe you’re thinking, “hey, what are you doing? Who are you to think that is your space, when I’ve been waiting on it?” Your lizard brain might take over and cause you to feel that rage that makes your adrenaline spike. The threat here isn’t one of safety or survival, it’s to your status—you’re thinking, “who are you to think you are more important than me?” What examples come to mind where you have this kind of response? Now conversely, when we recognize others as having value and status, they are more likely to relax and have greater control of that lizard, which means they can think clearly without the flight, flight or freeze response taking over.

Next, the “C” stands for “certainty. The social and relational need for certainty refers to your ability to predict the future. This doesn’t refer to any mystical abilities, but our simple need to know what’s coming next. The need to predict the future is as basic as, knowing that when I wake up, I still have the same job I had when I went to bed. Knowing that when I go to the bank, the money I left there is available to me. Knowing that the day marked on my calendar for my children to go to school, the school will be open. During the early pandemic days, we suffered through an enormous amount of uncertainty, and that takes a toll on your social and relational needs. But even without the pandemic, we all require a certain ability to know what’s

coming next, and when we don't have it, our lizard brain takes over and we don't have clear access to our rational brain. Think of the fear that some children, or adults have when they have an unexpected change in their schedule or routine, and that creates anxiety about what comes next. Conversely, when you provide people with a sense of certainty about what comes next in a project or in their job, they feel more at ease and can be more productive. So pause and think of examples of a lack of certainty that caused your lizard brain to take over.

The "A" in SCARF stands for autonomy is a sense of control over events. Again, this doesn't mean controlling the weather or having great power, but it does mean being treated like an adult who can do things on her own. Now, think back to when that urge happened for you. When do children want to do things on their own? As teenagers, toddlers, as soon as they can talk, or even sooner? It is the way our brains are wired to want to do things ourselves, to assert our autonomy. Think about the term "micromanaging" which is when someone hovers over you and manages every decision you make. That is never used in a positive context. So when we feel we have a sense of autonomy and are driving our own car, so to speak, or steering our own ship, we feel social and relational rewards, but when we don't, our lizard can come out again, and keep us in that zone of threat. If members of your team or even community members don't feel like they are being treated like adults who can make their own choices, then they may shut down their logical brain and go to lizard town. You can help people by giving them enough autonomy to feel like grown adults, which gives them greater relational satisfaction, puts them more at ease, and ultimately allows them to be more productive. Think about examples where you felt micromanaged and your autonomy was threatened.

Next is the "R" in SCARF, which stands for relatedness. This is a sense of safety with others. In this SCARF model, the degree to which people feel a sense of connectedness and similarity to those around them is directly related to whether or not people feel they are engaging in safe or threatening social interactions. People feel greater trust or empathy with those that they consider in their group or with whom they share similarities. You are more likely to let those people to get closer to you, and have greater distrust of others. So, think about the people you most trust. People who you feel safe having in your home. People you would trust with your valuables—both material and emotional, like your feelings. Now, imagine that they do something that you consider a betrayal of that trust. That tends to hurt more than if someone you didn't trust did the same thing, because you had a sense of relatedness to the one you did trust. So you can SCARF and have your lizard brain take over if you are dealing with an out-of-group member that you don't trust and you feel like they are invading your inner circle, or if you are dealing with a betrayal from someone within your group. On the flip-side, you can increase a sense of safety by making connections that increases a sense of safety and relatedness with those on your team or the communities you work with. Now pause and think about examples where relatedness was breached and your lizard brain took over.

And finally, the “F” in SCARF is for fairness. This is the perception of equitable exchange between people. Fairness is a tricky term because we’ve all felt things that were “not fair” but it isn’t always objective. Our perception of the fairness of any situation is not based on “cold”, rational thought processes, but instead, emotions are integral to judging fairness, and those judgments emerge over time through social experiences with others. A sense of fairness may emerge from cultural contexts, but even as children, the idea of fairness seems to be innate. You probably said “that’s not fair” as a child, I think everyone has. Now, shout out for me what you were told as a child when you said that? Did I just hear you say “life’s not fair!” I think we’ve all heard that too. And yet, we still expect it to be. When that social and relational need for a sense of fairness is not met, our lizard brain takes over and it’s not about reason. When did you last feel a heated sense of unfairness? How did it make you feel? How have you seen others respond?

Now, knowing what SCARF is, those specific social and relational needs that, when not met, can cause the irrational lizard to take over our brains and actions, what should we do with that? Well, we can use it to avoid SCARFing others, recognize when we’re in danger of SCARFing ourselves, and understand behaviors in ourselves and others that result from SCARFing. Conscious awareness of the SCARF concept allows us to help others engage more productively by consciously choosing our actions so that we are minimizing threats to others and maximizing rewards, especially internal motivators.

Knowing what these triggers are that call up our lizard brains, you can make choices to activate people’s reward circuitry by being sure they have their status recognized and respected, that they are given certainty, that their autonomy is not taken away, that they feel a sense of relatedness, and that they feel exchanges with you are fair.

Be aware of environments that can trigger social threats and cause our lizard brains to emerge, like authoritarian and intimidating people who diminish our status. Be careful of unclear instructions, objectives, and irrelevant tasks that fail to provide certainty around the goals and likelihood for achieving them. Avoid excessive structure and a lack of choice that rob people of their autonomy. Look out for a heightened power distance preventing participants from developing a sense of connection and relatedness with others. And be careful not to engage in favoritism or arbitrary rules that undermine fairness.

Remember, reward people by providing for their SCARF needs, rather than provoking them. This will be enormously helpful in your conflict management.

Now, that was a lot, but to recap: we did some myth busting around the idea that conflict is always bad, and instead recognized that conflict can be the source of creativity and energy. We explored 5 conflict styles and emphasized that you should make choices of which style to use based on the situation, and the combined importance of being right and preserving the

relationships involved. And finally, we explored how the brain works in conflict through the SCARF model.

Conflict management is a critical part of being an adaptive leader, because it is something you need to adapt to the circumstances. Knowing a little about how to read those circumstances and make better choices to fit your goal of managing the conflict can help you become a stronger adaptive leader.

On behalf of the Region IV Public Health Training Center, I want to thank you for listening. We hope this podcast will help you build your confidence and capacity to address complex challenges in your public health organization by growing and thriving as an adaptive leader. Our next episode will focus on collaborative leadership as an important part of adaptive leadership. Until next time, reflect on what you've heard and how it fits into your leadership journey.