

Young, T. (2023). Conflict and its resolution in outdoor learning. In S. Priest, S. Ritchie & H. Ghadery (Eds). *Outdoor Learning in Canada*. Open Resource Textbook. Retrieved from <http://olic.ca>

# Conflict and its resolution in outdoor learning

Tom Young

As a graduate of the Centre for Conflict Resolution at the Justice Institute of BC, Tom Young approaches conflict resolution collaboratively. In his retirement, he was the Executive Director for the Global Peace Hut in North America and for the West Vancouver Chamber of Commerce. Prior to this, he worked as an executive in information technology at The Vancouver Stock Exchange, BC Gas (now FortisBC), and Canadian Tire Acceptance Ltd.

## Defining Conflict

Conflict in this context refers to friction, tension, or dispute in the group dynamics of adventure and not to land-use conflicts in environmental resource management (Raffan, 1993). This chapter shares the best tools available to assist with conflict resolution, but does not consider potential activity clashes among motorized and self-propelled users: for example, snowmobilers and skiers (Jackson et al, 2003).

Conflict is an inevitable part of outdoor learning, especially in adventurous programs where small groups live and operate under stressful conditions involving challenge and nature. Conflict is defined as the social friction or tension caused by discord or discrepancies between two or more parties (Pruitt et al, 2004). While programs do not want to manufacture conflict, they should allow it to arise naturally from the stress of living outdoors in close quarters while enduring difficult challenges and hardships in groups. Conflicts, with the potential to become hostile, aggressive or even violent, can arise from:

- miscommunication of plans or decisions,
- disagreement over tasks or performance,
- differences in workload or contributions,
- dissimilarities in personality or viewpoints,

- disparities in principles, ethics, and morals,
- competition rather than collaboration, and
- beliefs of being overlooked or excluded.

Left unresolved, even these minor disputes can degenerate into rifts that can divide people and destroy morale, thus preventing them from growing or meeting their collective goals. Therefore, knowledge of conflict resolution skills is critically important for outdoor leaders and for their program participants.

While conflict resolution is prevalent in therapeutic outdoor programming, where behavioural change is the primary purpose (as described below), conflict resolution should also be part of educational programs that intend to change thinking and in cultural programs such as Indigenous land-based healing (Simpson & Coulthard, 2014). For example, Venture Academy consists of three residential centres in Ontario, Alberta, and British Columbia. Their programs work with troubled teens and utilize outdoor adventure therapy for conflict resolution, especially within the teens' families (Venture Academy, 2020).

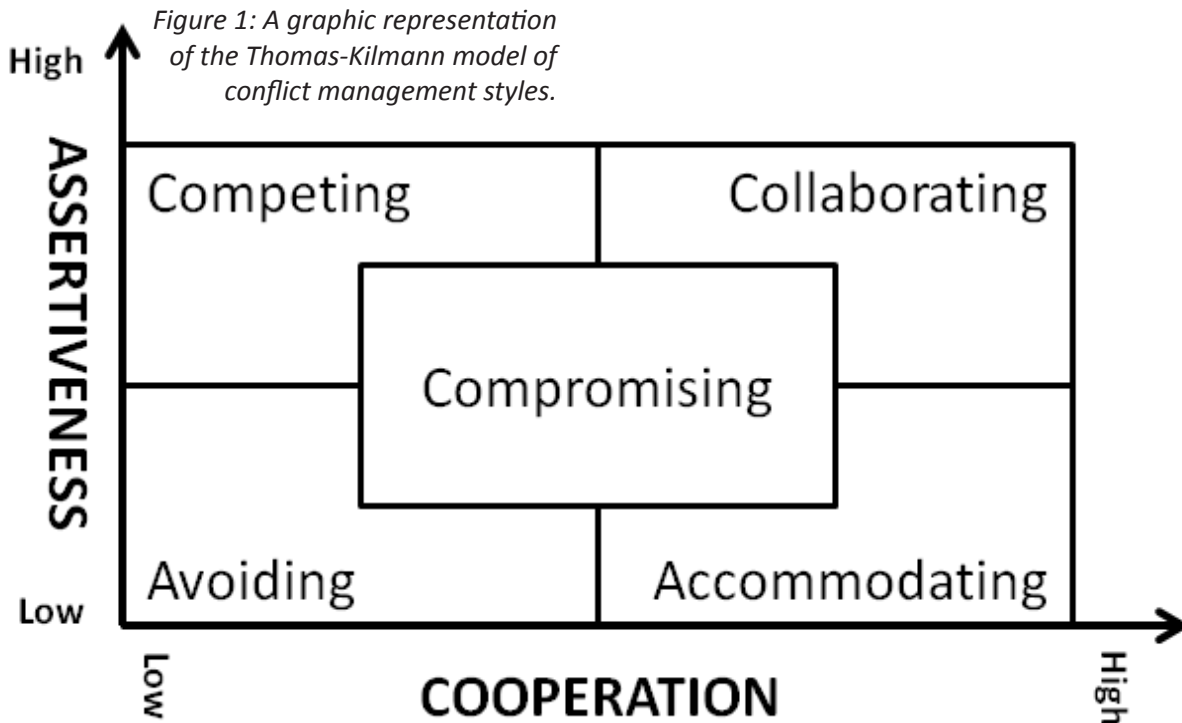
*A vital element of any family therapy treatment is conflict resolution. One of the crucial benefits of family therapy is understanding what causes conflict within*

*the family and learning new skills to help manage it more healthily.... Family therapy aims to improve communication and resolve conflict within a family group.... The sessions will also encourage the family to solve problems and make decisions together. This will bring the family group closer and forge stronger relationships between the individuals.... A troubled teen will feel much more supported, and they may even feel like they're in a much better place to tackle mental health conditions, trauma, or addiction.*

### Conflict Management Styles

Conflict resolution is a management process by which two or more parties find a cordial solution to a difference of opinion, perspective or practice (Kilmann & Thomas, 1977). Five different styles of managing conflicts have been identified and extensively researched (Thomas & Kilmann, 1974). These five conflict management styles were graphed as a function of assertiveness and cooperation for the two conflicted parties as shown in Figure 1.

1. **Avoiding.** Low on both assertiveness and cooperation, this is an easy approach to conflict that may be used when no chance of winning exists. It may also be used to move on to bigger conflicts. The expression that defines this best is "losing the battle to win the war!" The original conflict is never solved, but energy is saved for later conflicts that may matter more.
2. **Competing.** High on assertiveness, but low on cooperation, this is a win-lose approach that could be used when safety is compromised or when time is of the essence, such as in an outdoor adventure emergency.
3. **Accommodating.** High on cooperation, but low on assertiveness, this can also end up being a win-lose situation. Someone typically gives in with this approach and doing so may lead to future bad feelings and subsequent negative outcomes.
4. **Collaborating.** High on both assertiveness and cooperation, this is a win-win approach and a negotiation method that should always be the first preference. The parties all work towards what is of interest to them and others with a genuine effort on everyone's behalf to negotiate toward a successful resolution.



5. **Compromising.** Balance on moderate assertiveness and cooperation, this is a feel good solution to many conflicts, where everyone seems to partially win as each person in the conflict walks away with some sense of gain.

When working with groups, outdoor leaders should resolve early conflicts, but slowly transfer conflict resolution skills to the participants, so they can eventually take responsibility for resolving their own conflicts and repairing relationships damaged by those disputes (Priest & Gass, 2018). The interpersonal ability to do this is the collective pro-social skills that outdoor learning intends to develop in participants.

A leader should avoid being drawn into the groups' conflicts, by staying neutral, but instead should allow individuals to resolve their own conflicts and reflect (during group debriefing discussions and/or solo contemplation) on the success or failure of attempting to do so, thereby gaining competence.

At times, a leader may have to get involved in reconciling a minor dispute, but should use the opportunity to teach the skills and process of conflict resolution. In rare cases the leader may desire to be an impartial third party to help guide the individuals to a settlement, but, in order to maintain neutrality, is better off finding someone else to act in this role. Only in matters of safety or limited time, should an outdoor leader become a mediator, so as to expedite the conflict to conclusion. While writing about Canadian canoe pedagogy in wilderness travel, Newberry (2012) remarks on this form of learning:

*...education that doesn't rock the boat... [crushes] conflict...rather than opening up possibilities for learning. But while our students are challenging themselves with new experiences, we too must challenge ourselves to be more than palatable, to face perhaps our fears of pedagogical failure or perhaps our own indifference. The kind of learning I am proposing is risky. It risks the loss of certainty, simplicity, and innocence;*

*it risks unwieldy affect in the face of the suffering of others: it risks the self (pp. 38-39).*

In an allusion strangely relevant to outdoor education, Sigmund Freud (1930/1961) famously warns educators that education that does not prepare students for conflict, that idealizes the world for them, is like equipping people starting on a Polar expedition with summer clothing and maps of the Italian Lakes. Education, he surmises, fails to prepare the young for the aggressiveness and ethical complexity of the world in which they are to live (p. 42).

### Consider Interests Over Positions

People tend to show up to conflict fixed in their respective positions and the trick is to get each party to shift toward expressing their interests, because finding common ground is easier for interests than positions. A position is what parties want without regard for anyone else's needs. Those parties know that they are absolutely correct and have the only good solution, so are unlikely to budge. If parties take fixed positions, then debates immediately focus on why they are right. As more focus is put on positions their egos eventually get in the way of any reconciliation. Even if a compromise is reached to end the dispute, each party may feel cheated by only getting half of their entitlement. While time may have been wasted, negative tactics were likely used and both parties are likely feeling injured and betrayed to the point of irreparably damaging their relationships.

"A simple way to shift from positions to interests is to add the word "because" at the end of a positional statement. This word induces curiosity and leads us to ask questions about the reasons that drive a position" (Harper, 2004, p. 122). Keep in mind that a "position is something you have decided upon. Your interests are what caused you to decide" (Fisher et al, 2011, p.42). Consider this story adapted to outdoor learning from one initially presented as two sisters arguing over an orange (Fisher et al, 2011). It demonstrates the power of an interest-based approach.

*Two campers were fighting over the last lemon. Both held the same position of wanting the entire lemon for themselves. However, a third camper saw an obvious fair solution and, so the two could share equally, sliced the lemon in half, clumsily leaking its juices all over the ground. The first camper explained that he was interested in the juice of one whole lemon so as to complete the dessert for that night's meal. The second camper needed to peel the lemon rind in a continuous spiral in order to win a bet she had made earlier. Now, neither need could be satisfied. If only the two had shared their interests, instead of defending their positions, they could have initially peeled a continuous spiral and then juiced the remaining fleshy fruit. If only they had shifted from "I want the whole lemon" to "I need some of the lemon, because..."*

### Steps to Resolving Conflicts

Since a preferred interpersonal learning opportunity in outdoor adventure is passing conflict resolution skills on to others, a closer look at the process is warranted. Conflict resolution typically has six steps: prepare, collect, exchange, bargain, compromise, and agree.

1. **Prepare** by learning everything you can about the conflict. Seek to understand the background behind a conflict and the unique needs of each party. Determine their common interests, the outcomes they seek, and whether they would be willing to meet with the other party for further discussion. Identify where they disagree and define those disagreements in detail. Raise the conflict issue with both parties and convince them to seek resolution. Provide a neutral environment, a comfortable setting, and sufficient time for discussions. Also, cover the meeting logistics including duration, confidentiality, note taking method, and follow-up meeting options.
2. **Collect** much more information by probing deeper. Meet with each party to determine feelings and expectations. Be sure to know what lies on both sides of the dispute. Ask each person to describe their perspective of the situation. Remember to ask open-ended questions. These questions typically begin with the following words: how, who, what, where, when, why, describe, tell me more about.... Open-ended question generally can't be answered with one word and provide a starting point for further understanding. There are generally no right answers to these type of questions. Avoid temptations to suggest an obvious solution. This rescuing behavior loses your neutrality and draws you into conflict, with the appearance to have taken sides. Instead ask questions to help them discover the answers.
3. **Exchange** information between parties. Exchange verbal consent to proceed with resolution, willingness to share intentions or desired outcomes, and agreement with guidelines for the process. These guidelines can include separating the conflict from its cause, using "I" statements, not attacking one another, and listening without interrupting. Agree on the things you need to discuss and check off these items as they are covered. If possible write down that list on paper, if available, or in the dirt, when remotely located without writing materials. During the exchange of information, encourage disclosure, clarify vague issues, paraphrase for everyone to understand, and validate people for sharing or following the guidelines.
4. **Bargain** toward common interests. This is the most difficult of the six steps. The best agreements are reached through the interest-based negotiation. Always remember to separate people from problems by addressing their interests instead of positions. Encourage each party to state what they would be willing to give and what they would want in return. Work within ideal limits between the best outcome (getting all that you ask for) and the worst outcome (conceding to all demands). When arguments arise, move from debate (not heard) to dialogue (heard and understood)

by again asking open-ended questions that get both parties to share.

5. **Compromise** through collaboration. Do your best to remain cooperative and assertive. Knowing needs and interests gives you the ability to persuade each party to give a little to get more in return. If each can be persuaded to give up one concession that the other wants, then arguments will deescalate, animosity will evaporate, and progress will be made. The key to this lies in concessions that are perceived to have equivalent value and that link to the interests and needs of the other party. Look at those various interests and needs, especially as discussed. Review the work in exploring the various options considered so far. Try to think “outside the box” to any new thoughts or nuances that a review may trigger. The collaboration process may allow a mix and match of the ideas already discussed.
6. **Agree** through recorded verbal or written statements. Once conflict has been resolved, summarize the results, seal the deal, and commemorate the agreement with recorded verbal or written statements. Celebrate their success and decide how to monitor their progress. This should also be shared with any need to know individuals and/or documented if necessary.

### Avoiding Extremes

Some socio-emotional conflicts may arise at any time, yet others may have been brewing for quite a while. Participants in outdoor adventure programs may be pushed over their limit by just one more in a series of statements (the straw that broke the camel’s back). They can reply to threats or attacks with an outburst of anger or even aggression. Anger can be unconsciously exasperated by fatigue or hunger and can also be consciously escalated by someone who is just looking for a fight (the pot that boils over).

In adventurous outdoor learning, becoming afraid in response to a risk taking challenge or getting angry in response to a social conflict elicit

the same arousal cycle. This arousal cycle leads to a frequently uncontrollable flight or fight response from the sympathetic nervous system in the person who is afraid or angry. They want to flee the danger or fight their foe. Eons of evolution has readied them to do this. The arousal cycle has five phases: trigger, escalation, crisis, recovery, and depression (Reilly et al, 1994).

1. The **trigger** phase begins with the perception of a threat, perhaps an argument, criticism, or shocking revelation. The sympathetic nervous system kicks in with a fight or flight response and within seconds adrenaline/epinephrine flows freely throughout the body and brain.
2. The **escalation** phase follows with increased heart beat, respiration rate, and blood pressure. Pupils enlarge, muscles tense up, and the voice may get louder. At this point, the chances of immediately calming down are gone. Filtering out the hormonal effects will take many minutes. An agitated or argumentative individual may exhibit alarm or hostility and look flushed or tense.
3. The **crisis** phase occurs only if fear or anger emotions have not begun to dissipate. If still afraid or angry, survival instincts initiate, and a fully alert person may fight, take flight, or occasionally freeze in place. In this peak phase, cognitive processes such as making judgments and decisions are greatly impaired. They may not speak clearly, hear what you are saying, or process language very well. An individual in crisis may be a serious danger to them self, others or property and can display disruptive, confrontational, irrational, bullying, insulting, or intimidating behaviours.
4. The **recovery** phase engages several minutes after the crisis is over. Either anger or fear has prevailed, or the individual has found a way to calm down, while the hormones subside. The body needs to recuperate from the stress and so heart beat, respiration rate, and blood pressure decrease. Pupils contract, muscles relax, and the voice returns to normal volume. Cognitive processes take longer to return, but

reasoning and awareness improves with time.

5. The **depression** phase signals a return to near normal arousal levels, since some vitals may temporarily depress in order to compensate for earlier over-stimulation. Scrutiny of recent events is now possible, but doing so may be accompanied by feelings of embarrassment, shame, guilt or regret, leading to emotional depression. They may cry, sleep, withdraw, or appear remorseful. These declines may trigger another arousal event, but in an emotional rather than physical, mental, or social context. Therefore, avoid assigning blame or analysing until later.

Understanding this cycle, and knowing that anger will subside, helps leaders to check their responses and the reactions of other participants in the peer group so that matters do not reach escalation. For leaders, the trick is to control reactions to the first outburst and not to get drawn into the conflict by going through the same arousal cycle and responding in kind. Anger met with anger easily rockets to aggression.

Instead, calm down, using self talk and relaxation techniques. Know your own triggers and factors that push your buttons, raising you to extremes, then devise strategies for coping with these. Reply to anger with time to cool off. When appropriate, acknowledge the other person's anger and ask about its source. Show empathy for the emotions that others experience and the situations they must deal with. Once the other party has entered their recovery phase, begin the negotiations again. If the anger persists or worsens toward you, seek intervention from a neutral alternative, like another leader.

Conflict Resolution skills are simple but not easy. Like playing music or competing in sports, these skills must be practiced in order to improve your competence. Once competent in theory and practice, you can begin sharing what you know with others, especially outdoor adventure program participants.

## References

- Fisher, R., Ury, W. L., & Patton, B. (2011). *Getting to yes: Negotiating agreement without giving in*. Penguin.
- Freud, S. (1961). *Civilization and its discontents* (J. Strachey, Trans.). W.W. Norton and Company. (Originally published 1930).
- Harper, G. (2004). *The joy of conflict resolution: Transforming victims, villains and heroes in the workplace and at home*. New Society Publishers.
- Jackson, S. A., Haider, W., & Elliot, T. (2003). Resolving inter-group conflict in winter recreation: Chilkoot trail national historic site, British Columbia. *Journal for Nature Conservation, 11*(4), 317-323.
- Kilmann, R. H., & Thomas, K. W. (1977). Developing a forced-choice measure of conflict-handling behavior: The "mode" instrument. *Educational and Psychological Measurement, 37*(2), 309-325.
- Newbery, L. (2012). Canoe pedagogy and colonial history: Exploring contested space of outdoor environmental education. *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education, 17*, 30-45.
- Priest, S. & Gass, M. (2018). *Effective Leadership in Adventure Programming, 3rd ed.* Human Kinetics.
- Pruitt, D., Kim, H.S. & Rubin, J. (2004). *Social conflict: Escalation, stalemate and settlement*. Random House.
- Raffan, J. (1993). The experience of place: Exploring land as teacher. *Journal of Experiential Education, 16*(1), 39-45.
- Reilly, P. M., Clark, H. W., Shopshire, M. S., Lewis, E. W., & Sorensen, D. J. (1994). Anger management and temper control: Critical components of posttraumatic stress disorder and substance abuse treatment. *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs, 26*(4), 401-407.

Simpson L. & Coulthard G. (2014). Leanne Simpson and Glen Coulthard on Dechinta Bush University, Indigenous land based education and embodied resurgence. Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education and Society blog. Retrieved from <http://decolonization.wordpress.com/2014/11/26/leanne-simpson-and-glen-coulthard-ondechinta-bush-university-indigenous-land-based-education-and-embodied-resurgence/>

Thomas, K. W., & Kilmann, R. H. (1974). *Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument*. Xicom.

Venture Academy. (2020). 3 Ways Family Therapy Benefits Your Teen. Retrieved from <https://www.ventureacademy.ca/troubled-teen-blog/3-ways-family-therapy-benefits-your-teen/>

### **Recommended Resources**

The Canadian Institute for Conflict Resolution: A leading source for conflict intervention services. <https://www.cicr-icrc.ca/en/>

The Justice Institute of British Columbia: A leading source for conflict resolution skills training. <https://www.jibc.ca/areas-of-study/conflict-resolution>