

## CASE STUDY 4.3

## The Would-Be Borrower

*Imagine yourself as Mary: What style would you use as you respond to these issues?*

A roommate conflict developed between Joan and Mary over the use of Joan's new car. When Joan talked to Mary about her anticipated purchase, Joan often said things such as, "It will be wonderful when we have a car." Mary interpreted Joan's use of the word "we" to mean that she might be allowed to borrow the car on certain occasions. When Mary's sister came to visit, Joan drove Mary's sister's car, and Mary figured this was a case of "share and share alike."

Joan began to shop seriously for a car during the two weeks before Thanksgiving. When Joan was about to make her purchase, Mary saw a new opportunity open up for her. Due to scheduling problems on her job, Mary was not able to go home for Thanksgiving. This would be the first Thanksgiving Mary had not been home. Mary asked Joan if she could use her new car to visit her parents, who lived about 120 miles away. Mary knew Joan would not need her car that weekend because Joan was going out of town with her parents for the holiday.

At first, Joan refused, but Mary persisted in raising the subject. Joan reported that she was "appalled that Mary had even asked." For Joan it was an issue of "invasion of personal property." As the tension over this question built, Joan began to use a withdrawing style: She gave Mary ambiguous, noncommittal replies and often simply did not reply at all. Mary had a more forceful, dominating communication style than Joan, and Joan saw avoidance as a way of sparing herself a direct confrontation with Mary. Joan assumed that a direct denial of Mary's request would provoke an emotional outburst, which she wanted to avoid at all costs.

In response to Joan's nonresponsiveness, Mary began to apply pressure indirectly, using a contending style. She pressed Joan to loan her car. Mary also had phone conversations with her parents within earshot of Joan in which she talked about the things they could do if she could get a car from Joan. Joan interpreted this as an attempt to make her feel guilty, and it worked. Joan felt a great deal of stress and turned to her family for support,

which they readily gave. The interaction of the two styles set up a competitive climate and an impasse developed: Mary saw the issue as a question of a favor one would willingly do for a friend. Joan saw it as a question of whether Mary could infringe on her personal property.

Joan bought her car on the weekend before Thanksgiving and stored it in her parents' garage until it was insured. Mary mentioned her holiday plans with the car several times during the weekend and interpreted Joan's silence as acquiescence. The blowup occurred when an insurance salesman called on Joan. Mary had been giving Joan advice on insurance and was also present at the meeting. After discussing rates, the salesman asked Joan when she wanted her coverage to begin. Joan replied, "Thursday night at midnight"; therefore, the car would be uninsured on Thanksgiving Day and Mary could not drive it. Joan reported that this move was not premeditated: "I saw an escape hatch and I took it." The significance of Joan's shift to contending was not lost on Mary. She was shocked at "the devious way Joan had gone about it."

Mary reported that after the salesman left, Joan "just started babbling and babbling about nothing at all and getting really nervous." Joan shifted back to withdrawing after her one "trump." In the "twenty-minute scream-fest" that followed, styles shifted several times more. Mary asked Joan if she purposely started the insurance later to keep her from borrowing the car. Joan replied "Yes" and shifted back to other topics. After listening with half an ear for a while, Mary told Joan that she was "really ticked" with her. Joan replied, "I know you are. I knew you'd be like this. I knew you'd do this." Mary said that it would have been better if Joan had just told her "straight out." Joan replied that her mother had said that Mary should not be allowed to use her car. Mary was upset that Joan had told her mother: "Now I suppose you're going to tell your whole family what a rotten, miserable roommate you have!" Joan did not reply to this. Mary kept up her challenges, charging Joan with being selfish. Joan did not respond. Mary tried a normative justification, arguing that Thanksgiving is a special occasion. Joan did not respond. Mary asked Joan if the issue was that Joan thought she

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was a lousy driver. Joan replied that it was just too soon for someone to borrow her car. "Oh, so you don't want me to soil it before you can use it!" Mary flashed back.

When the shouting match ended, Joan did her laundry and remained in the laundry room for an hour, crying. Mary remained in their apartment, crying. When Joan returned to the apartment, the two did not speak until Joan approached Mary to show her a magazine article Mary had been looking for. This softened the mood somewhat but did not initiate conversation. Eventually, as they prepared for bed, Mary approached Joan: "Look, we've got to end this. I'm sorry I asked for your car. It's too soon for me to be asking. I should have realized this from other things you said." Joan replied that she was sorry she didn't give Mary a straight answer at first. Mary was disappointed at Joan's answer because she expected an apology from Joan for not letting her use her car. Both women went to bed.

The two did not have much contact over the next few days. Mary reported feeling alienated from Joan: "It was a pretty terrible couple of weeks after that." The conflict was never really resolved, but it gradually faded into the background, and the two women resumed their friendship. ■

#### Discussion Questions

- To what extent do your options for approaching a conflict depend on the other person's behavior?
- Think of a situation in which you have wanted to use a collaborating style and found that the responses you received made it difficult or impossible.
- What styles would you have used if you were Joan or Mary? Might the conflict have turned out differently had they chosen different approaches?

## 4.10 SUMMARY AND REVIEW

### *How do conflict strategies, styles, and tactics differ?*

Strategies refer to a party's plans for a conflict, whereas styles refer to the general orientation that a party takes in a conflict, and tactics refer to specific behaviors a party engages in. A party adopting a competing style, for example, approaches the situation as a competition and chooses competitive tactics, focusing on attaining his or her goals and showing little regard for the other's goals. Styles are more flexible than strategies in that they do not require the party to plan out a definite set of tactics or behaviors. Strategies always involve the choice of one or more styles, but someone can enact a style without consciously planning a strategy. Planning ahead can be quite useful, but the fact that conflict interaction generally escapes the control of any single actor also points to the limitations of detailed strategies.

### *Is a person's style an unchanging characteristic?*

Evidence suggests that people can and do change styles during conflicts. However, studies that measure conflict styles also suggest that people develop habitual styles that they tend to employ as their first tendency in conflicts. If we become aware of our conflict styles, it is possible to change them and even to choose them strategically. The main prerequisite for doing this is knowing how to enact different styles. That is why it is important to try styles and tactics that we do not ordinarily use.

### *What types of conflict styles are there?*

The five classic conflict styles are competing, accommodating, avoiding, compromising, and collaborating. There are also variations within several styles, which represent different ways of carrying out the style. For example, forcing and contending are variations on competing.

### *Can conflict styles (and conflict behaviors) be described in terms of more basic dimensions?*

Styles vary along a number of dimensions. Styles differ in terms of

- *Assertiveness*: degree of focus on own goals
- *Cooperativeness*: degree of focus on other's goals

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The people in the group were from a wide variety of backgrounds and professions: Some headed smaller civic organizations, some were students, one worked for a local newspaper, one was an elected city official. One member, Rhonda, was an attorney in her thirties and a long-time activist in local politics. She was outspoken, and took the floor several times early in the first meeting. She spoke in a loud and confident tone of voice, and came to the meeting with well-developed ideas about what the group should do. She was able to argue her position clearly and forcefully, while other members still seemed to be thinking about what the current situation was like and calculating what should be done as an immediate plan of action.

When Rhonda made a strong case for what the group should do in the first part of the initial meeting, the climate in the group grew uneasy and tense. Several people looked at each other uncomfortably, and most people seemed hesitant to speak. The group seemed to be "holding its breath" and anticipating that Rhonda would be difficult to work with. Although she was obviously bright and had good reasons supporting her suggestions, members feared that Rhonda had set ideas and would not budge from the proposal she had just articulated so forcefully. The group worried Rhonda would feel as if she had lost face if she moved away from her stated position.

After several people made comments that were not related to Rhonda's proposal, one man in the group began pointing to possible complications and problems with Rhonda's suggestion. She listened intently, and when he was finished speaking, Rhonda said that she really had not thought of the points he had raised and that she agreed they posed a serious set of problems. She asked the man if he had an alternative suggestion, listened to it, and then shortly began arguing for it. She made stronger and more well-reasoned arguments for the man's proposal than he himself had made, and Rhonda was able to clarify questions other people in the group had about the proposed plan without dominating the interaction or intimidating people further.

The group soon saw Rhonda as one of its most valuable members. She could carry a line of thought through for the group and lay out a well-reasoned set of arguments for a stand she was taking, but at the same time, she was not hesitant to turn 180 degrees on an issue if new information or evidence was presented that she had not previously considered. ■

#### Discussion Questions

- What are the dangers of assuming that someone would be threatened if you argued with them?
- Can you describe a situation where you felt someone was not changing a stated position even though you felt he or she had had a change of mind?

### CASE STUDY 6.3

## The Controversial Team Member

*Imagine yourself as one of the three staff members of this case: In what ways is your face threatened by your co-worker? Why would you want to talk to your supervisor?*

Four staff members in a personnel office at a large computer corporation were assigned to a rather demanding recruitment project in addition to their regular job of interviewing and placement. They were asked to design and implement an effective program for minority recruitment and placement within the corporation. The project was viewed as one of the top priorities for the department, and

the workers knew that the success or failure of the project would have a significant impact on their advancement in the organization.

About a month before the project was due, one of the team members asked her immediate supervisor if they could meet with him. The supervisor agreed, but when the team arrived, only three of the four members were present. The team had not asked the fourth member to attend the meeting with the supervisor. The problem the team faced was that the fourth member

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repeatedly made decisions and completed tasks that all team members had not endorsed. The three staff members felt that these decisions and actions were threatening the quality of the entire project.

The fourth member was a man who had been in the personnel office a year longer than the other three. He felt he had more knowledge and experience than the other staff members, and he made this point on several occasions. He also told them that he did not want this project to interfere with the time he needed to complete his normal work routine, and so he was willing to make certain decisions about the project on his own to move things along faster.

Although the three felt intimidated by their co-worker's outspoken and evaluative style, they also felt that he was bright and hardworking and did have some experience that they lacked. In most cases, however, they felt this additional experience was unrelated to the current assignment. They saw the man's concern about the project taking time away from his normal work as pure arrogance; they all had the same work schedule to complete each week and needed to find time to work on the recruitment project.

The team felt particularly insulted because, on several occasions, the man did not show up for meetings that had been scheduled. He did not let the group know that he would not be attending nor did he offer any explanations for his absence afterward. He also made no attempt to get information that he held to these meetings. Thus, the team's work was often delayed. When he was present, meetings were tense and antagonistic, and the motivation of the team had plummeted because of the problem.

When the supervisor asked the team if they had discussed their reactions openly with the "problem" person, the three members said they had not. They had wrestled with the idea but decided that the issue was just too emotional to air openly. They were, however, mad at the co-worker, felt intimidated by him, and wanted the department management to hear about the problem. ■

#### Discussion Questions

- Is there a "downside" to having face concerns addressed by someone who is not directly involved in the conflict?
- In what ways does "gossip" sometimes function as an attempt to receive face support?

recognized that the student may have had a good case and that she may have been too harsh in enforcing her no make-up policy. As she entered the meeting where the conflict was to be addressed, however, there was a great likelihood that her current beliefs on the problem would not be stated unless something was done to ease her concern about the image she might acquire by following her inclinations. Part of her reluctance to move also stemmed from an already existing threat to face: The image she had of herself as a fair professor had already been called into question publicly by the student's decision to contact the college official.

In the environmental group, the face-saving issue was anticipated by members who heard Rhonda make forceful arguments early on. A tense and uneasy climate arose because most members assumed Rhonda was strongly committed to her position and would be inflexible. There was a general sense that Rhonda would be a "problem," if the group challenged her suggestions. The group was surprised and relieved to find that Rhonda's intellectual and verbal abilities could provide information and clear reasoning for them without being tied to her self-image. If no one in the group had run the risk of questioning Rhonda's initial stand, because of the fear of embarrassing her, the group could easily have become dissatisfied with the decision-making process but remained silent, perhaps eventually splintering into pro- and anti-Rhonda factions.

Face-saving was certainly a concern of the staff on the personnel project as they entered the supervisor's office. Although the team feared the emotional strain and potential