

## **Rule 3: Choose Your Style**

*From Greg Giesen's Eight Simple Rules to Managing Conflict*

*(A conversation during a recent coaching session)*

**Me:** Tom, how are things going with Nancy?

**Tom:** Well...not that great actually.

**Me:** What do you mean? Last time we talked you were all excited about dating her.

**Tom:** I know, but things have changed. She's blown me off.

**Me:** Wait, weren't you just with her a week ago? What happened?

**Tom:** She just stopped communicating. She was supposed to call me on Monday and never called. On Tuesday she was going over to a mutual friend of ours and we were going to get together later that night and she blew me off then as well. No call...no text...no email. Zero! Nada!

**Me:** So what did you do?

**Tom:** Since we had planned to go out to a fancy restaurant for New Year's, I texted her in the morning and asked if we were still going. And guess what? No response yet again. Can you believe it? So I cancelled our reservations and told her so in a text.

**Me:** So why didn't you just call her?

**Tom:** I had already called earlier in the week with no luck. What do you think; I'm a glutton for punishment!

**Me:** Okay, so I'm assuming she didn't respond to your latest text either.

**Tom:** Correct; that is until today. And get this...she said she had an unexpected out-of-town guest show up and hadn't looked at her cell phone for the past three days. She said she was sorry we missed our dinner.

**Me:** How did that make you feel?

**Tom:** Like I'm an idiot! Come on Geese, I wasn't born yesterday. Does she sound like someone who is interested in developing a relationship with me to you? Didn't check her cell phone for three days! Come on! This is a woman who is attached to her phone. She lives on her Facebook app.

**Me:** So is it over?

**Tom:** It is for me.

**Me:** Are you going to tell her?

**Tom:** Why should I? She's the one who stopped communicating with me. What would be the point?

**Me:** What do you gain by not communicating?

**Tom:** She gets some of her own medicine. Let's see how she likes it!

**Me:** So part of the non-communication for you is to retaliate?

**Tom:** You just don't treat people that way Geese.

**Me:** Who are you talking about Tom, you or her?

**Tom:** She started it. She disrespected me first. That's not right.

**Me:** I only bring it up because it seemed like you really cared for her.

**Tom:** Never again. Burn me once, shame on you...burn me twice...shame on me.

**Me:** Is shutting off communication a trigger for you?

**Tom:** Yes. My mother would stop talking to me when she was upset. It drove me crazy.

**Me:** What did you do then?

**Tom:** I shut down too. We'd play this game of not talking to each other. It sometimes went on for days.

**Me:** How would it end?

**Tom:** Eventually one of us would slowly start talking to the other. In most cases she'd be the one to break the silence.

**Me:** Why not you?

**Tom:** Because I was mad at her for shutting down communication and wanted to punish her by not giving in.

**Me:** Sounds similar to what you are doing with Nancy.

**Tom:** I guess so.

**Me:** So would it be fair to say that you're an "avoider" when it comes to conflict?

**Tom:** Not always. But it's probably what I do when I'm really upset with someone.

**Me:** But when you do that, doesn't it actually prolong the conflict? You've already mentioned that shutting down communication is a trigger for you. So in essence, you extend the pain; extend the uncomfortableness; extend the awkwardness, and extend the conflict from being resolved.

**Tom:** (being funny) Yeah, so what's your point?

**Me:** So would you say that the pattern of shutting down or avoiding communication around a conflicting issue has caused more harm than good for you in the long run?

**Tom:** Probably.

**Me:** Probably?

**Tom:** Okay, yes it has Dr. Phil.

**Me:** I'm just trying to help here. So what other options exist in these situations?

**Tom:** I guess I could assert myself instead of always reacting and responding to the other person.

**Me:** Ah, that would be a different approach. By always reacting to their response, you end up giving them all the power in the relationship dynamic. Can you see that?

**Tom:** I can now.

**Me:** But by being assertive and talking on the issue, you not only take the power back but you get to end the conflict instead of dragging it out for days at a time.

**Tom:** Point made. Maybe it comes down to self-respect. I need to respect myself first.

**Me:** Exactly. By standing up for yourself you are truly respecting yourself. You're also changing the pattern that you've used for years and thereby changing the dynamic of your relationships. All of that by choosing to respond differently when triggered.

**Tom:** But what if it doesn't work?

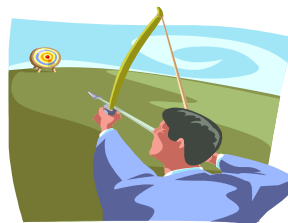
**Me:** If you stay consistent around it, people will eventually accept the new you. If you are erratic and only sometimes assert yourself, you'll be sending mixed messages and then it could very well backfire. Consistency is the key.

**Tom:** You want me to call Nancy, don't you!

**Me:** Why wait to change the pattern.

The above true story introduces the concept of Rule 3: Choose Your Style. When I explain this concept in the classroom, I introduce the five different Thomas Kilmann Conflict Styles (Avoiding, Accommodating, Compromising, Collaborating and Forcing) and have the class self-select which style is their "go-to" style under most circumstances.

My intent in this article is merely to emphasize the importance of *choosing* the most appropriate style for the conflict at hand as opposed to *being* the style. What do I mean? The key to any conflict resolution process is to separate ourselves from the conflict. When we are attached to the conflict, like Tom was in the scenario above, our egos, hurt feelings, and self-protectiveness quickly take over and move us in the opposite direction from resolution. Tom's relationship with Nancy didn't have to be over. His decision was based on emotion and hurt feelings not on logic. Tom got so caught up in the dynamics that he lost sight of the options that were available to him. As a result, he didn't choose a conflict style but instead slipped into his "go-to" style or "default" style of avoidance. Granted, avoidance may have been the most comfortable style for him but clearly not the most effective. Tom had an opportunity to change an ineffective pattern from his past but instead reinforced it by giving in to it.



A colleague of mine said it best: We have a bow and a quiver with five arrows at our disposal at any given time. Each arrow represents one of the five conflict styles. When in a conflict, we need to keep our eye on the bull's-eye (the desired outcome) and choose the arrow which will get us there most accurately. If we don't choose an arrow, our default arrow becomes our arrow of choice. The problem is that our default arrow has more to do with familiarity and self-protection than conflict resolution. More often than not, it isn't our best choice.

The same goes for each of the five conflict styles. There is an appropriate and inappropriate use of each individual style. Avoiding is an effective response to conflict when some guy cuts you off on the highway. Why? Because you have no investment in having a relationship with him and it would be dangerous to escalate a conflict that could lead to an accident. However, using avoiding as a mechanism to shut down communication with a person you care for is conversely not an effective use of that style. This is why it is so important to step back from the conflict and choose a style that will lead to a desired outcome.

If you are not familiar with the Thomas Kilmann Conflict Styles, go to <http://www.kilmanniagnostics.com/> to learn more. There are also many YouTube videos on the model as well. Either way, it is important to know which of the five conflict styles is your default style so you can override it in circumstances where one of the other styles might be more appropriate. Just having that awareness can make all the difference. Make sense?

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