



For Better or Worse

How Understanding Personality Traits Can Help You Effectively Mitigate and Manage Alliance Conflict

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We all know that different personalities react to conflict in different ways. Facing perceived danger, one person might shy away, another might freeze in his tracks, and another might jump in with both feet. But what if we conducted a deeper investigation into the source of the situation and examined which personality types or traits might be likely to cause significant conflict in the first place? Taking this question one step further is especially important in the context of alliance management: once we recognize the traits we're dealing with—in ourselves and others—what actions do we take to ensure that our alliances stay professional and productive?

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In a previous article on managing conflict in alliances (“Managing Alliance Conflict,” *Strategic Alliance Magazine*, Quarter 1, 2012), we noted that understanding “perceptual filters” was critical to reframing and resolving discord. Personality plays a key role in defining those filters and the perceptions that come from them. On one side of an interaction, personality informs and affects what we say and do. On the other side, as we take in and process the actions of someone else, personality typically governs much of our reaction to those perceptions. Given the pervasive role of personality in human relationships, those who have a solid understanding of personalities have the ability to make a significant, positive difference when managing alliance conflict.

Personality Primer

To begin, let’s talk about the word “personality,” which we use often in a descriptive context. “That guy has personality!” conveys a sense of social appeal, for example, while “He has no personality” conveys the opposite. As a working definition, let’s use the Bing Dictionary’s definition of personality: “the totality of someone’s attitudes, interests, behavioral patterns, emotional responses, social roles, and other individual traits that endure over long periods of time.”

Over time, behavioral scientists have grouped character traits into several widely accepted personality types. Each of us has a personality with some collection of characteristic behaviors and responses. Our friends or family could describe us as being a certain kind of person. However, most people have some flexibility, and when their usual style doesn’t work or causes problems, they tend to try out other styles. When personality traits are so rigid that they create barriers to relationships and success, they become an obstacle in an alliance that needs to be managed. A psychologist might say that someone with a single, rigid style of coping and interaction has not just a personality, but a personality disorder.

Know What to Look For

People with two kinds of personalities seem to have more trouble in alliances than other types—and when these character traits rise to the level of a personality disorder, it usually spells trouble in an alliance.

The first is the obsessive-compulsive personality. Such a person is deeply interested in all the details and risks of an alliance and often takes an annoyingly long time to make a decision. This need to collect data and know everything can be attributed to their neurotic need to minimize the risk of

mistakes entirely and maintain full and complete control of the situation—two impossible goals in the world of alliance management.

The second type is the narcissistic personality. These are people who need to be right all the time, to win in every situation, and who cannot tolerate the perception that they have “lost face” in a conflict. Narcissists are very easily offended and become angry quickly when someone disagrees with them.

As noted, most successful people will have elements of each of these personality extremes. But when these traits get in the way of having a normal, joyful, and productive life, it pushes a personality into the disorder category.

While it would be impossible to offer comprehensive psychology training in the short space of this article, we do hope that the set of tools we provide will help you manage—or proactively minimize—conflict that is heavily influenced by an individual’s personality.

Be Proactive

Organizing and facilitating governance meetings is a common activity for alliance managers. Obsessive-compulsive and narcissistic personalities can be managed using a combination of tools and techniques before, during, and after alliance meetings. The techniques detailed below are designed to help you avoid needlessly triggering a negative reaction and to assist you in dealing with one, should it occur despite your best efforts.

1. Eliminate as much uncertainty as possible prior to a governance meeting or other interaction.

First, make certain that the food and shelter components are taken care of and communicated. The obsessive-compulsive person, for instance, cannot focus on the big picture in a meeting if he or she is uncomfortable about items everyone else might consider minor details. Alliance managers can help such people avoid conflict and be productive by working diligently to get those details taken care of early and by avoiding change whenever possible. For some people, if they don’t know where they are going to sleep, when they are going to eat, where the restroom is, exactly when things will happen, and who is in charge of what, they cannot talk about other issues!

2. If you do have to make a change in a meeting, communicate it early.

Produce an agenda prior to convening any meeting, and

Diagnostic Criteria for Narcissistic Personality Disorder include:

Grandiose sense of self-importance
Believes that he or she is “special”
Requires excessive admiration
Interpersonally exploitative
Lacks empathy
Shows arrogant, haughty behaviors or attitudes

Diagnostic Criteria for Obsessive-Compulsive Personality Disorder include:

Preoccupied with details, rules, lists, order, organization, or schedules
Shows perfectionism that interferes with task completion
Excessively devoted to work and productivity to the exclusion of leisure activities and friendships
Reluctant to delegate tasks or to work with others unless they submit to exactly his/her way of doing things
Shows rigidity or stubbornness

Source: Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 4th Edition, American Psychiatric Association, 2000.

make sure all key individuals have the chance to provide input or feedback. Once the agenda is agreed upon, stick to it as closely as possible. Get to the meeting early and make sure that everything is set up and works the way it is supposed to. If something isn't going according to plan, decide how you are going to remedy the situation before everyone else shows up. Handling the details proactively will help the obsessive-compulsive person focus on the main issues instead of bogging everyone down in the details. For the narcissistic person, consider communicating any issues on a one-to-one basis. Singling them out before the meeting will make them feel special, so they will be able to contribute immediately rather than be disruptive by having to establish their own importance.

3. Make sure that you have a well-understood set of ground rules for your meeting.

Ground rules should include who is in charge of the meeting, how minutes will be taken and approved, and how topics will be introduced. Avoid “walk-in” items unless absolutely necessary. If you must have a walk-in item, use the time to set up the problem and, if possible, set a later date to make a decision.

4. If you believe that a compromise will be necessary, make sure that all parties have a face-saving way to come to that agreement.

Be gracious. Point out the areas that you can agree with in the other person's argument. Choose your words carefully, making sure you don't use loaded language (words that carry strong positive or negative implications, beyond their literal meaning) that may trigger an explosive, nonproductive reaction.

5. Know in advance what your boundaries are.

How much are you willing to give on a particular topic? How hard are you willing to fight? How much nonproductive behavior are you willing to tolerate before you take some type of action? Ponder these things and decide prior to the meeting what your limits will be. Make sure that you choose appropriate boundaries and then follow through. If these things are done in advance, then the detail-ridden person will be reassured that things are under control and the self-important person will be pleased that their input has been heard and incorporated.

Plan Your Own Reactions

While the person with an obsessive-compulsive personality will be more productive in meetings if you help them by managing the details and keeping things under control, the narcissistic person will be a better contributor if you work to minimize confrontation and mitigate the risk they will feel their status is being threatened.

If during the meeting something goes awry, these techniques can help you get things back on track:

1. If you have contributed to the problem in any way, stop and apologize for your part in it. Apologizing for your part in an unpleasant exchange does not mean that you agree with everything the other party says. It does, however, demonstrate that you are willing to own your part of the conflict.
2. Suggest a path that will get the group back on track and acknowledge the positive contributions that each side is making.

If the issue has too much emotion to intervene immediately, take a break and allow people time to regroup. During this time, be polite and make sure that the other party has a place to meet privately and talk, have a cup of coffee, or be able to engage in other self-soothing activities.



3. Try to let everyone know how important they are to the process, and then get the group back together and discuss the next steps forward.
If the topic is still too hot, agree to take it up after some agreed-upon period of time, and then focus on other topics that need to be addressed.
4. If the conflict somehow manifests itself in writing, move to have a face-to-face or phone/video conversation.
If you find that the dialogue can only be conducted in writing, make sure that you are removing any loaded words. Have a trusted colleague read the document before you send it, and if the subject has legal implications, by all means have a company attorney review the letter before it goes out.
5. Consider changing the environment if you know someone's personality will make progress impossible.
Sometimes, the self-important personality type who absolutely has to win simply cannot successfully participate in an alliance. For such people, the whole concept of an "alliance" is foreign, because their personalities dictate that they should always come out on top. When it becomes apparent that someone in your alliance group has such a personality, the best course is to find a way to help them bypass alliance meetings, but that often requires that you help them save face in the process.

If an alliance leader with narcissistic or obsessive-

compulsive tendencies asks to join in a particularly challenging or tense interaction, for example, you can provide an alternative and offer him or her a face-saving way out:

- "You'll be able to stay visible to keep the team motivated if you stay back at corporate."
- "None of their senior management will be attending the meeting."
- "We plan to get down in the weeds in this session."

The techniques we describe above to manage personality-related conflicts during meetings can be used in other common situations for alliance managers as well. For example, alliance managers should thoughtfully consider who should participate at the negotiating table during contract or amendment negotiations. Or, when developing contingency plans to mitigate potential alliance risks, the alliance manager should consider solutions that meet the needs of the alliance leader with narcissistic or obsessive-compulsive personality traits.

Know Thyself

The more you know about personality, the better you will become at managing conflict. However, the key to being good at helping people whose personalities make them inflexible is to be flexible yourself—to mold your own behaviors and responses to the needs of the moment. You have to know well the people with whom you work, but perhaps one of the best adages is, "Alliance professional, know thyself!"

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