The Three Rs of Conflict Management for Department Chairs and Faculty

Walter H. Gmelch and James B. Carroll

ABSTRACT: This article presents an introduction to understanding and addressing conflict in academic departments. Current philosophies toward conflict in organizations include a principled approach encouraging the positive benefits that conflict may bring to institutions. To utilize this approach it is important to understand the nature of conflict, identify effective response options, and develop skills in principled conflict resolution. This paper identifies the structures within organizations which inherently cause conflict. In addition, various strategies for dealing with conflict are outlined based on the Thomas/Killman response modes. Finally, Fisher and Ury's foundation for principled conflict resolution is applied to departments in higher education.

The 1990's promise to be a decade of major change for the 3,100 universities and colleges in the United States. Changing student clientele, disintegrating college curriculum, increasing competition within higher education, growing technological changes, and shifting attitudes and practices of faculty represent the forces currently shaping higher education (Keller, 1983). This transformation is especially important for the estimated 50,000 department chairs responsible for the management of the technical core of colleges and universities, the academic departments. Progress and change cannot be made without conflict and nothing is more important for American higher education than the emergence of academic leaders equipped to handle the conflicts created by these challenges.

Since most chairs have received little or no management training, the focus of this article is to help chairs recognize, respond and resolve conflicts within academe.

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In the spring of 1990 the Center for the Study of the Department Chair conducted a comprehensive survey of 808 department chairs in over 100 research and doctoral granting colleges and universities across the United States. The purpose of the study was to expand the theoretical and practical understanding of the position of department chair, and specifically to focus on the stresses and strains associated with chairing an academic department. Not surprisingly, chairs identified interactions with colleagues as a major category of stress. Over 40 percent of the department chairs suffered excessive stress from “making decisions affecting others, resolving collegial differences and evaluating faculty performance” (Gmelch & Burns, 1991). Thus, they suffered from interpersonal conflict with their colleagues. In contrast, only 17 percent of the department chairs complained of excessive stress from resolving differences with deans and 5 percent with students. No other chair activities were identified as producing nearly as much stress as these people-based responsibilities. With this in mind, the following sections will address effective conflict management between department chairs and their faculties. The materials were initially developed for the Third National Conference on Personal and Professional Renewal for Faculty in Atlanta (Gmelch & Carroll, 1991).

**Approaches to Conflict Management**

The most common notion of departmental conflict usually includes images of controversy, disagreement, or differing opinions between faculty members. However, it is not the controversy itself that is undesirable, but the negative reactions often exhibited in the face of conflict. Responses to conflict may be positive emotions (excitement, enjoyment, stimulation, curiosity, creativity, commitment, involvement), more negative ones (anger, distrust, resentment, fear, rejection), or even emotionally neutral (change or a different point of view). To some extent, responses to conflict are related to the approach that management brings to adjudicating conflicting demands (Katz & Kahn, 1978). As Table 1 portrays, three philosophies reflect managerial attitudes toward conflict: traditional, behavioral, and principled. The first two philosophies historically describe predominant views espoused in the management literature (Robbins, 1974).

The traditionalist approach from the late nineteenth century through the middle 1940’s was simple: Conflict is destructive and therefore should be eliminated. The role of the manager was to purge
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Table 1
Approaches to Organizational Conflict

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Philosophy</th>
<th>Nature</th>
<th>Prescription Strategy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1890–1940's</td>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>Destructive</td>
<td>Eliminate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950–1980's</td>
<td>Behavioral</td>
<td>Natural</td>
<td>Accept</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Present Time</td>
<td>Principled</td>
<td>Necessary</td>
<td>Encourage</td>
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continues

conflict from the organization. In higher education, this remains the predominant view. Williams (1985) contends that most administrators feel that conflict is destructive and should be avoided. While there are exceptions to this generalization, they only serve to accentuate the predominant negative belief that conflict emanates from ill dispositions rather than constructive dialogue.

By the 1950's the traditionalist view was followed by the behavioral approach. Freud believed that aggression is an innate, independent, instinctual disposition in man. Therefore, conflict was accepted as natural and inevitable, since "complex organizations, by their very nature, have built-in conflicts. Disagreements over goals clearly exist. Sections compete for recognitions. Departments compete for prestige... All compete for power" (Robbins, 1974, p. 13). The department chair strategy, therefore, would be to manage conflict since it is inevitable. As Bennis points out: "Conflicts stem basically from differences among persons and groups. Elimination of conflict would mean the elimination of such differences. The goal of conflict management is, for us, better conceived as the acceptance and enhancement of differences among persons and groups..." (Bennis, Benne, & Chen, 1969, p. 152). Behavioral philosophies still assume the need to reduce conflict, although the strategies to accomplish this end require changing people's attitudes and behaviors.

More recently, the principled approach views conflict as something necessary and to be encouraged in a productive organization. With this style of management, the needs of both the individual and the organization are met. While in the 1970's few administrators employed principled philosophies (Robbins, 1974), the recent popularity of the Harvard Negotiation Project has influenced a broader based use of principled conflict management as espoused by Fisher and Ury (1983). The remainder of this article focuses on the necessary ingredients of
principled resolution. They are the three Rs of long term conflict management:

1. Recognize the nature and causes of conflict;
2. Identify and explore effective response options; and
3. Practice the art of principled conflict resolution.

The first step to help department chairs approach conflict in a positive and constructive manner is to recognize the nature and causes of conflict in higher education institutions.

Conflict Recognition

Unfortunately most people take conflict personally and believe that if they are involved in controversy it must be due to their personal actions. Ironically, conflict in most complex organizations such as universities and colleges is sewn into the fabric of the institution. A review of the research on organizational conflict reveals 10 structural relationships which actually can create conflict among faculty and administrators, regardless of any interpersonal animosities or personality differences. It is important for department chairs to recognize these role and organizational characteristics so they will not take the tension and conflict personally, rather, understand that such conditions are built into the structure of higher education. However, how they respond to these conflict situations is their personal responsibility, which will be addressed in the next section of this article. For now, it is important to elaborate on the following ten characteristics: (1) levels in the hierarchy; (2) rules and regulations; (3) degree of specialization; (4) staff composition; (5) nature of supervision; (6) participation in decision making; (7) sources of power; (8) rewards and recognition; (9) staff interdependence; and (10) roles and responsibilities.

Levels

As the size of an organization increases, goals become less clear, interpersonal relationships become more formal, departments become more specialized and the potential for conflict intensifies. In educational organizations, Corwin (1969) found that 83 percent of the schools with six or seven levels of authority reported high rates of disagreement between faculty and administrators as contrasted to 14 percent
in schools with three or fewer levels of authority. As the administrative line-authority in universities increases, the potential for conflict between the echelons also increases.

**Rules and Regulations**

Generally, as job structure increases the amount of role certainty increases, thus reducing interpersonal conflict between employees. However, employees feel greater intrapersonal role conflict since they become confined by routinization, rules and regulations. In higher education, where faculty have a great deal of autonomy, the potential for interpersonal conflict increases since roles and expectations become less clear and more difficult to monitor and supervise.

**Degree of Specialization**

In a study of schools (Corwin, 1969), high degrees of specialization increased the level of conflict intensity. Secondary schools segmented into departments suffer more conflict than homogeneous elementary schools, and potentially higher education institutions, where departments are housed in separate buildings, experience more conflict than secondary schools. This, of course, does not presuppose that elementary schools represent more positive working environments than colleges since conflict can also cause positive outcomes.

**Staff Composition**

Established groups have been found to develop more constructive conflict than ad hoc committees (Hall & Williams, 1966), thus as tenure of group members increases conflict is more likely to be functional. Therefore, one would expect high staff turnover to stimulate destructive conflict within organizations (Robbins, 1974). Given that faculty tend to be less mobile in higher education than other professions, their stability may be a factor in increased constructive departmental conflicts. However, one should consider not only longevity but differences in age, gender, background, values, and other demographic and psycho-social characteristics which influence interpersonal conflict. For example, as both age and tenure differences decrease among staff members, the degree of conflict seems to decrease. While a homogeneous staff may experience less interpersonal conflict than a hetero-
geneous group, the conflict emanating from the mixed group may result in productive and healthy changes.

Nature of Supervision

The closer one is supervised the more conflict will be created. However, one must ask what the goal is of supervision. If change is required in employee behavior then close supervision may be necessary and produce positive results. Faculty in higher education plan and control their own work and work style, and as long as they produce the desired results in teaching, research and service, close supervision may create unnecessary tension.

Participation in Decision Making

One of the tenets of departmental decision making is that of faculty involvement. Interestingly, as the level of participation increases, the amount of conflict also increases. Most studies support the conclusion that participation in decision making and conflict are positively correlated. This is especially the case where true value differences exist, as will be noted in the principled resolution section of this article. The assumption behind participatory decision making is that the quality of the decisions will increase with increased input. While this may be true in some cases, there are definitely tradeoffs between time, efficiency and effectiveness.

Sources of Power

French and Raven (1986) suggest five bases of social power. In essence, department chairs can influence faculty through several sources: through the authority vested in the position (legitimate power), through their ability to provide rewards and recognition (reward power) or punishment and withholding rewards (coercive power); through their knowledge and skills (expertise power); and/or through their ability of personal persuasion (referent power). Summaries of research indicate that the use of expertise and referent power (personal sources) yields greater satisfaction and performance of the staff than coercive power (Yukl, 1981). Universities and colleges rely predominantly on symbols rather than coercion or financial reward to influence employees. Leaders in these organizations, department chairs in
particular, use formal control by virtue of both their personality and position to motivate and coordinate their colleagues (Etzioni, 1964). In his review of power and conflict in educational organizations, Robbins concludes that "low and moderate levels of power . . . can assist in improving coordination and, therefore, work to reduce conflict. But where power is excessive, as perceived by a less powerful group, one may expect it to be challenged, causing increased conflict" (1974, p. 48). Additionally, in higher education, faculty hold exceptional power due to their professionalism: their expertise critically contributes to the success or failure of the organization. The department chair must recognize this or face considerable opposition as a consequence.

Rewards and Recognition

Rewards and recognition also contribute significantly to conflict. When a differential reward structure is used for two or more groups or departments, conflict is likely to occur. This is even more pronounced if the groups perceive they are competing for the same or limited resources. A department chair who must divide a fixed sum of merit increases among faculty is likely to encounter conflict among colleagues or between himself and colleagues. The more rewards emphasize separate performance rather than combined performance, the greater the conflict (Walton & Dutton, 1969). Faculty, who mostly teach in isolation and solitarily publish manuscripts, naturally find themselves in competition for and in conflict over the limited resources for reward and recognition.

Interdependence

In much the same way that differentiated reward and recognition create conflict, a limited amount of resources to be shared among colleagues sets the stage for increased conflict. When one person's gain is another's loss, faculty believe that the allocation of resources is a zero-sum game and the department is destined for conflict. Also, if faculty must rely on each other, or one department rely on another department, or one academic course builds on another to complete a task or gain achievement, conflict may likely result. In his definitive work on conflict, sociologist Georg Simmel (1955) concludes that conflict will occur when the activities of one group have a direct consequence on another group's ability to achieve its goal.
Roles and Responsibilities

Managers, who perform liaison or linkage roles in organizations, often find themselves in role conflict situations (Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, & Rosenthal, 1964). Department chairs must act as the conduit of information and policy between the administration and the faculty of the institution (Lee, 1985; Milstein, 1987). Ambiguity and role conflict results from attempting to bridge the administration and academic cores of the university, which are organized and operated differently (Bare, 1986). The academic core of teaching and research operates freely and independently in a more collegial system, whereas the managerial core maintains the mechanistic qualities of a bureaucratic system. The department chair is at the heart of the tension between the two systems. While this dynamic conflict between administration and academia is critical in order to maintain higher education organizations (Booth, 1982), it does place the department chair in a difficult position of mediating the demands of administration and faculty. These pressures, unique to departmental chairs, result in an attempt to fill a paradoxical Janus like position. In addition, chairs suffer the intrapersonal conflict of trying to simultaneously be an active faculty member and an administrator.

In summary, a review of the research in educational institutions reveals a variety of work relationships which can potentially increase the intensity of conflict among colleagues. Higher education institutions are potentially plagued with conflict due to their many levels, participatory decision-making, segmented rewards, high interdependence, use of authoritative positional power, and tension between the academic and administrative core of faculty and administration.

The purpose of recognizing the nature of conflict in this section is not to debate whether the conflict from these organizational characteristics is negative or positive, but merely to recognize that it exists and to prepare department chairs to respond appropriately when it arises—the subject of the second R of conflict management.

Conflict Response

Having considered the institutional characteristics which encourage conflict, attention is now devoted to the options chairs have to respond to these conflict situations. Most notable is the pioneering work of
Kenneth W. Thomas (1976) who has developed a theoretical construct and, along with Ralph H. Kilmann, devised a human relations instrument to test the practical application of individuals' response options (1974). Basically, conflict responses can be described along two behavioral dimensions: (1) how assertive one is in terms of trying to satisfy one's own concerns and interests, and (2) how cooperative one is in terms of satisfying the interests and concerns of others. The strength and weakness along these two dimensions define five styles for responding to conflict, displayed in Figure 1. Much of the following discussion is based on the original work of Thomas and Kilmann (1974) and is adapted, for sake of illustration, to the potential conflict between department chairs and faculty.

**Competition (High Assertiveness and Low Cooperativeness)**

In this response style department chairs pursue their own interests at the expense of faculty. This is a power-oriented mode in which one uses whatever resources, both positional and personal, appropriate to win. Chairs may use their ability of persuasion, academic rank, position, or reward and punishment to achieve the ends they deem appropriate.

**Figure 1**

**Conflict Management**
Accommodation (Low Assertiveness and High Cooperativeness)

The opposite of competition is accommodation where the department chairs neglect their personal concerns to satisfy the faculty needs. This self-sacrifice response takes the form of yielding to faculty points of view, giving personal time to promote needs of faculty, or being altruistic in dealing with faculty concerns.

Avoidance (Low Assertiveness and Low Cooperativeness)

When chairs choose not to address issues, they are neither assertive nor cooperative—thus avoiding confrontation. This response is taken to sidestep an issue, postpone it until later, or withdraw from it completely.

Compromise (Intermediate Assertiveness and Cooperativeness)

Department chairs using a compromise style seek an immediate, mutually acceptable solution which partially satisfies both parties. Rather than striving for the best solution, compromise centers on the resolution of conflict by splitting the difference, exchanging resources, or seeking a middle position response.

Collaboration (High Assertiveness and High Cooperativeness)

Collaboration represents probably the ideal response between faculty and department chairs. Given time and cooperation, they work together to satisfy the interests and concerns of both parties. However, exploration of faculty and administration interests is necessary if long term resolution is to be achieved. It is to this end that the final R (Resolution) is proposed—a permanent resolution of differences.

Before addressing resolution, several points should be made about conflict responses. First, faculty and chairs use a blend of all five response styles. In fact, many of the styles may be used in the management of a conflict. Second, collaboration is not always the most effective and efficient response style. It takes time and the willingness of both parties to engage in collaborative response styles. And finally, many advantages can be attributed to each response style. Competition is useful when quick action is required and when protection is needed against those who take advantage of non-assertive behavior. Chairs may wish to accommodate when an issue is of little importance
to them or when harmony is important. Avoidance is useful when chairs believe the risk clearly outweighs the gains and when more information is needed. When an expedient solution is needed in order to resolve time pressure, compromise may be the best temporary solution. Finally, chairs and faculty should collaborate when an issue is too important to compromise and when new, permanent solutions are required.

In summary, the effectiveness of a response style depends on the conditions of the conflict situation. It is not our thesis that one style is better than another, but one should select the best response to match the situation, taking into consideration the advantages and disadvantages of each style. Chairs and faculty should have enough flexibility, skill and comfort to use any of the five styles. Nevertheless, people tend to develop a preference for one style over another.

Rather than discuss style preference, department chairs need to assess which style produces the desired end. Savage and his colleagues (1989) extended the work of Thomas and Kilmann by asking two basic questions: (1) Is the substantive outcome very important to the manager? and (2) Is the relationship outcome very important to the manager? A strategy for selecting conflict management styles appears by overlaying these questions on the Thomas/Kilmann model (Figure 2).

**Figure 2**

Unilateral Negotiation Strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Competing</th>
<th>Collaborating</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Firmly Compete</td>
<td>Trustingly Collaborate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actively Avoid</td>
<td>Openly Subordinate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoiding</td>
<td>Accomodating</td>
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**Implication of Relationship Outcome**

<table>
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<th>Cooperativeness</th>
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**Need for Substantive Outcome**

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**Importance of Relationship Outcome**

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*The Three Rs of Conflict Management for Department Chairs and Faculty*
(1). The strategy of trusting collaboration is used when both relationship and substantive outcomes are important. Openness between faculty and administration would be the hallmark of this strategy in order to achieve a win-win outcome.

(2). If chairs are more concerned with establishing a positive relationship with faculty over substantive goals, then open subordination would be the appropriate strategy. This is a yield-win strategy which yields substantive outcomes to faculty, but rarely to the chair.

(3). Firm competing occurs when the substantive interests are of more concern than relationships. This may happen when the chair has little trust in the faculty and exerts power over them to achieve goals or outcomes. Essentially this results in a win-lose solution where the chair trades off the outcome for a neutral or even poor relationship with faculty.

(4). If neither substantive outcome nor relationships are important to the chair, active avoidance produces withdrawal from the issue. Rather than avoid by default, this strategy represents an explicit behavior of no interest in nor willingness to discuss the potential conflict.

These four unilateral strategies provide a proactive dimension to conflict responses as originally conceived by Thomas. Presumably department chairs strive to maintain positive relationships with their faculty members and therefore should seek long term resolution—the third and final R of conflict management.

**Conflict Resolution**

The final R in creative conflict management is to search for long term resolution such that both parties satisfy their interests and concerns. The process for accomplishing this end is based on the assumption that the relationship between faculty and department chairs should not be sacrificed to the benefit of substantive outcome. Fisher and Ury (1983) from the Harvard Negotiation Project confirm and expand this assumption. They believe any method of resolution may be fairly judged by three criteria: (1) It should produce wise agreement (outcome); (2) It should improve or at least not damage the relationship between the people involved; and (3) It should be efficient. The first and second criteria reiterate the importance of relationships and substance as supported by Savage. The third criteria suggests a measure of expediency and effectiveness.
A substantive or wise outcome is that which "meets the legitimate interests of each side to the extent possible, resolves conflicting interests fairly, is durable, and takes community interests into account" (Fisher and Ury, 1983, p. 4). The most common form of resolution is achieved through a series of positioning and repositioning which may or may not take into consideration the true interests of both parties. While it does serve the purpose of telling the other side what is wanted and where one stands, positioning fails to meet Fisher and Ury's basic criteria. In fact, arguing over positions produces unwise agreements, is inefficient, and endangers ongoing relationships.

In contrast to positional resolution, the technique of principled resolution as espoused by Fisher and Ury provides a straightforward approach to conflict appropriate for use in almost any circumstance. This method is especially appropriate in academic settings where both outcome and relationships are simultaneously important. Four points provide the foundation for principled resolution.

People: Separate people from the problem

In the days of demonstrations and civil disobedience in the 1950's and 1960's the book by Saul Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals* (1971), taught the opposite: attack the people psychologically and once their egos get involved, you have the advantage. Principled resolution avoids personal attacks. It requires actively listening and empathizing with individuals' needs. When department chairs become committed to a stated idea or position, their egos get connected to their position and their energies direct them toward their own defense and they attack their adversaries rather than solving the problem. In contrast, focusing on the problem allows the interests and perceptions of both parties to be explored without personal attacks that destroy relationships.

Interests: Focus on interests, not positions

Focusing on positions will produce win, lose or yield results, all of which do not guarantee that both parties have achieved a satisfying, long-term resolution. Interests are the basic intangible or abstract needs of a party such as values, principles or psychological or physiological needs. Needs are rarely talked about when parties come into conflict situations. They are also very difficult to clarify because they
are not often negotiable, usually intangible, and not measurable. Some of the needs expressed by faculty are such things as security, economic well-being, social acceptance, power, recognition, control, and autonomy. A negotiable and measurable position is tenure, but the deep need of security and recognition is probably at the root of most tenure conflicts. The bottom line is that interest satisfaction must be achieved if conflict is to be resolved.

**Options: Generate a variety of possibilities before deciding what to do**

Avoid premature judgments or locking in on positions before assumptions are examined and interests are explored. Once parties lock into positions, they represent a line of arguments from position A to position B with options defined along the line between these two points. The only resolution left open after positioning is compromising between A and B such that one party loses and the other wins. In fact, a solution (point C) may exist, not even on the A-B line, which creatively satisfies both parties' needs. This creativity aids in the search for mutually beneficial solutions.

**Criteria: Base resolution on objective standards**

Department chairs and faculty must find fair standards and procedures to achieve the desired end results. The more standards of fairness, efficiency, or scientific merit are brought into the discussion, the more likely a wise and fair resolution will be produced. In position resolution, parties spend their time and energy defending their positions and attacking the other side. An agreement consistent with such standards as precedent, equal treatment, tradition, market value, moral codes or professional ethics is less vulnerable to attack. In this search for resolution both parties must yield to principle, not to pressure.

In contrast to positional resolution, the principled method focuses on basic interests of both faculty and department chairs, mutually satisfying options, and fair standards and procedures which, in combination, typically result in wise outcomes or agreements. Once people have also been separated from the problem this allows chairs to deal with faculty empathetically as human beings, in search for a satisfying resolution and amicable agreement.

Traditionally the positional resolution of conflict has taken sides, either *hard* or *soft* negotiations. Chairs are typed as either faculty or
administration—either for faculty interests or against them in favor of administrative needs. The soft department chair emphasizes the importance of building and maintaining relationships such that they approach conflict as friends, seeking agreement, making offers, and yielding to pressure. In contrast, the hard department chair sees faculty as adversaries, seeks victory, makes threats, and applies pressures. However, chairs do not have to choose between hard or soft styles of resolution. The above four principles enable chairs to change the rules of the game and approach conflict from a principled point of view such that they approach faculty as mutual problem solvers, seeking a wise outcome by exploring interests and yielding to principle, not pressure. The contrasting highlights of these three approaches to conflict resolution are displayed in Table 2.

In conclusion, there is probably nothing in this article which intuitively department chairs did not know already. The purpose was to expose and organize the issues surrounding conflict management into a useable framework—the recognition, response and resolution of conflict.

This is not an article on how to win in the battle against faculty, but how to deal with differences such that all parties find a satisfying resolution, enjoy mutual respect, and maintain positive and productive relationships. It is hoped that these ideas have helped provide an understanding about creative conflict management. Unlike most negotiation strategies, if everyone involved understands this approach, it becomes easier, not more difficult to reach agreement. The next step is yours. To know, and not to use, is not yet to know.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Soft</th>
<th>Hard</th>
<th>Principled</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>Agreement</td>
<td>Adversaries</td>
<td>Problem Solvers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agreement</td>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>Victory</td>
<td>Wise Outcome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>Make Offers</td>
<td>Distrust</td>
<td>Independent of Trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make Offers</td>
<td>Yield to Pressure</td>
<td>Make Threats</td>
<td>Explore Interests</td>
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<tr>
<td>Yield to Pressure</td>
<td>Apply Pressure</td>
<td>Apply Pressure</td>
<td>Yield to Principle, Not Pressure</td>
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References


