Interpersonal communication
# in a simulated organizational conflict

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes an instructional case that is used in an undergraduate program on business communication. The case focuses on a simulation of an organizational conflict situation. The purpose of the simulation is to establish the relation between the way in which people interact in an organizational conflict situation and the outcomes on an interpersonal level. Through the simulation, a wide range of theoretical notions related to interpersonal organizational communication can be addressed. Examples include (non-)verbal communication, types of power and power manifestations, influencing tactics, (conflict) communication strategies, negotiation strategies, social influence tactics and resistance. The case allows students to relate these theoretical notions to the outcomes of an organizational conflict situation. Moreover, the simulation allows students to reflect on the role of conflicts in an organizational setting. The case allows large groups and activating learning and uses both traditional and online tools.

Keywords: simulation, educational case, interpersonal communication, organizational conflict
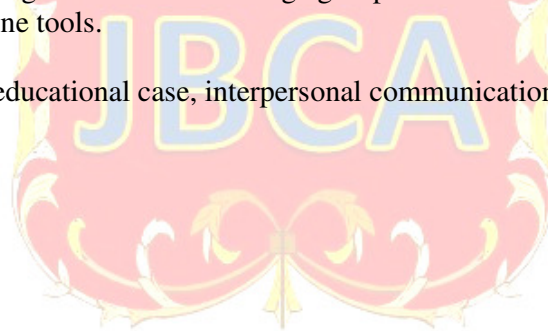
INTRODUCTION

This case is used in an undergraduate program on International Business Communication at a Dutch university, in a course on internal organizational communication. In the course, generally 100-150 students participate. The course consists of a theoretical component based on a textbook (Huczynski & Buchanan, 2016) and a practical component in which students apply their theoretical knowledge to a practical case. The theoretical component of the course consists of a series of lectures in which a wide range of theoretical notions with regard to organizational communication are addressed. The case allows students learn about an interpersonal communication in an organizational conflict situation by increasing their knowledge, comprehension of a number of theoretical notions. They also learn how to apply theoretical notions as well as analyze and synthesize these theoretical notions (Bloom, 1956).

An issue of teaching a (large) class of relatively young students that have little (or diverse) experience in organizational life, is that it is hard to conceive activated learning. As a consequence, it is a challenge to convey theoretical notions on organizational behavior and communication beyond a description of core (theoretical) concepts. By simulating a practical conflict situation, students immediately understand the mechanisms at play in organizational communication. At the same time, the simulation offers the possibility of sketching a fixed scenario. This way, the teacher keeps control over the experience so that the relationship between the simulation and the theory can easily be established.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

The purpose of the simulation is to establish the relationship between the way people communicate in an organizational conflict situation and the outcomes of the conflict on an interpersonal level. Secondary objective is to connect this piece of theory with a number of other theoretical concepts. At the end of the class students should be able to realize the following learning goals:
-   Through the simulation students gain knowledge of the terms, basic concepts and theoretical notions of interpersonal communication in an organizational conflict situation. Students for example learn about the terminology related to different conflict modes.
-   The simulation provides comprehension through a hands-on demonstration of the conflict modes. Students learn how to compare and interpret the effect of different conflict handling strategies.
-   From the simulation students learn to apply their knowledge in future situations by identifying the variables that affect the outcomes of a conflict.
-   Student learn to analyze and synthesize interpersonal communication in organizational conflict situations by presenting and discussing several theoretical notions.

THEORY AND CASE SETUP

In the first part of the lecture (45 minutes), students receive theoretical information about organizational conflicts in relation to communication. The core of this lecture is Thomas (1974) model of conflict resolution approaches: 'The Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI) assesses an individual's behavior in conflict situations—that is, situations in which the concerns of two people appear to be incompatible. In conflict situations, a person's behavior is located along two basic dimensions: (1) assertiveness, the extent to which the individual attempts to satisfy his or her own concerns, and (2)

cooperativeness, the extent to which the individual attempts to satisfy the other person's concerns. These two dimensions of behavior can be used to define five methods of dealing with conflict', see Figure 1 (in Appendix 1).

Assertive behavior, in which an individual focuses on satisfying their own needs, can lead to a competing (low cooperative) or collaborating (high cooperative) communication strategy. In the competing strategy an individual attempts to satisfy his or her own needs and is not concerned with the needs of the other person. It is a power-oriented strategy: the focus is on getting things done and on winning. In the collaboration strategy an individual tries to satisfy his or her own needs while at the same time attempting to address the concerns of the other person. The goal is to find creative solutions leading to a win-win situation by investigating the underlying needs of both partners.

Situations in which an individual does not display assertive behavior result in an avoiding (low cooperative) or accommodating (high cooperation) communication strategy. In the avoidance strategy an individual is not attempting to satisfy his or her own needs and is also not concerned with the needs of the other person. The consequence is that the conflict is not addressed. A lose-lose situation is likely to emerge. In the accommodation strategy an individual scores low on assertiveness but high on cooperation. The focus is on the other person which leads to a lose-win situation. The compromise strategy is intermediate in both assertiveness and cooperativeness. The objective is to find an acceptable solution for both parties who meet each other half way.

The simulation places these conflict modes in the context of interpersonal organizational communication. By using this approach, a wide range of theoretical concepts and psychological mechanisms can be introduced, e.g.,:

- (Non-)verbal behavior. An important factor in effective communication is the use of verbal and non-verbal communication. With regard to verbal communication one can for example look at questioning techniques (e.g. open, closed and probing questions) and the sequence of the interaction between communication partners. Linked to this is the use of different conversational techniques such as debating, arguing, disguising and undermining. With regard to non-verbal communication one can look at signals as such pauses and the use of symbols.
- Power types. A third subject that can be addressed in the lecture is the role of power (i.e. the capacity or ability to direct or influence the behavior of others or the course of events), and the different sources of power such as reward power, coercive power, referent power, legitimate power and expert power (French & Raven, 1958). Power can influence the outcomes of a conflict in interaction with the conflict mode that is used. In a competitive conflict resolution strategy, the person with the higher rank is much more likely to get his/her way as (s)he has the power to make a final decision.
- Social influence. There are different outcomes to situations in which social influence is exerted (see e.g., Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004), such as compliance, conformity, obedience, or conversion. The simulation can serve as input for an exploration of which factors contribute to the different outcomes.
- Persuasive communication. Communication is rarely a mere exchange of information, but regularly involves a persuasive attempt. The simulation can be used to identify, understand, and practice different influence tactics in interpersonal communication (e.g., pressure, exchange, ingratiation, cf. Yukl & Falbe, 1990).

In order to place the conflict resolution strategies in a broader context, one can look at the frame of reference that underlies the way in which organizations deal with conflicts. Fox (1966) defines four frames of reference on conflict, i.e., how people perceive and interpret

events based on their assumptions about reality, attitudes towards what is possible, and conventions regarding correct behavior. The unitarist frame perceives organizations to be essentially harmonious and conflicts as bad. In the pluralist frame conflicts are seen as an inevitable consequence of the fact that people within organizations have different interests. In contrast, in the interactionist frame, conflict is seen as a positive and necessary force for effective performance. The radical frame, finally, sees conflict as the inevitable outcome of capitalism. These frames of reference on conflict may serve as a starting point to think about how conflict can be perceived differently by different people or organizations, and how such differences may be reflected in communicative situations.

MATERIALS

The second part (45 minutes) of the lecture is spent on the simulation. The following materials are needed to execute the case:
- Slides that explain the case and the results (See Appendix 2)
- Five pairs of scenarios that describe different conflict strategies (See Appendix 3)
- Students can use their cell phone to conduct the conversation in Facebook messenger, WhatsApp or another text-based messaging system.
- Mentimeter, Shakespeak or some other voting tool that allows for real-time feedback.

After a short introduction (Appendix 2) explaining what students can expect, students couple in pairs. In each pair, one student is the employee and the other student plays the role of manager. The employee and the manager each receive their own card (Appendix 3) in which a (potential) conflict situation is outlined. The basis for the conflict is that the employee wants to follow a course, whereas the manager does not want the employee to attend the course. The cards for each pair of students vary in terms of the conflict resolution strategy (Thomas, 2008) that will be used, i.e., the degree to which both employee and manager focus on cooperativeness and assertiveness. For sake of simplicity, both students and managers receive the same strategy. Table 1 (in Appendix 1) provides an overview of all strategies. Each card begins with a short introduction and ends with a request. The text in between explains the conflict resolution strategy that is used. The actual cards can be found in Appendix 3.

To simulate a somewhat natural conversation, students will initially not explicitly be informed what their own (or their partners) strategy is. They only see the description of the situation on the card. First, students are asked to take a few moments to think through their strategy. Next, they simulate the conversation between manager and employee. They do this by conducting the conversation on their mobile phone via WhatsApp (or some other messenger system). This approach has been chosen for two reasons. First, as students have little or no experience with role play, the written form reduces potential social anxiety and offers room to think about what makes sense to say based on the scenario they received. Second, the conversation via WhatsApp makes it possible to exactly retrieve the conversation after it has taken place. Students can be asked to read the conversation out loud, share it with the rest of the group without having to do a stand-up performance, and analyze factors such as wording and tactics.

DISCUSSION AND TEACHING NOTES

To begin the discussion, ask the students to discuss in pairs which conflict resolution strategy they think they have just simulated, and let them reflect on the outcome (win-win, lose-lose, or any other option). Next, explain what was on the cards by showing Table 1 on slide three (see Appendix 2). The back of the cards show symbols that correspond with the

different strategies: compete is square, avoid is circle, compromise is diamond, accommodate is triangle and collaborate is a plus sign. Now students can become aware of the fact that different outcomes are possible given the different strategies that were used. In order to allow everyone to share that experience, a voting tool can be used. The following questions can be asked:

- What role did you play? What scenario did your couple have? The voting tool shows bar charts of the results. If all goes well, the combinations are roughly evenly distributed (after all, the scenarios were distributed on the basis of chance).
- What is the end result of your negotiation? Are you / is your employee going to the course? How satisfied are you with the end result? Note the variance in the answers: some employees are going to the course while others are not. Mentimeter (the voting tool used by the authors) allows clustered bar charts which makes it possible to visualize the relation between the conflict resolution approach and the end result. Figure *2* (in Appendix 1) shows the results from the Mentimeter in the author's 2019 in-class simulation amongst approximately eighty Bachelor's level students. The figure clearly shows that the compete strategy results in the manager getting his or her way, while the other strategies have more dispersed outcomes.
- A last question could focus on motivation: To what extent do you feel motivated to get back to work tomorrow? Again, it is possible to connect these results to the strategy that was used and/or the outcomes of the conflict.

To dig deeper into the conflict, it is possible to analyze the conversation from various perspectives (see suggested additions on e.g., (non-)verbal behavior, power, et cetera). Figure *3* shows an example of a conversation within the collaborative conflict resolution strategy. The following questions can be posed: Which questioning techniques have been used? Which conversational control signals have been used? Were those tactics effective? Another type of question to answer with the students is how the conflict resolution strategy is related to the source of power that was used. It is, for example, not unlikely that a manager in a competing strategy uses legitimate power whereas a manager in a collaborative strategy uses expert power. It is also possible to ask the employees how they experienced the source of power that was used.

Besides the use of a voting tool, it is possible to ask pairs of students to share their conversation by reading their conversation out loud. An option is to discuss the five different strategies or ask for an exceptional outcome (who's outcome was satisfying and whose was not?). Next, the conversation can be connected to the theoretical notions that were presented in the first part of the lecture.

EVALUATION

At the end of the session, students were asked to share their thoughts with regard to the simulation. The large majority of the comments was very positive: "I felt like it was really helpful, because we had to simulate a real-life situation. We were able to see that there are correlations between expression styles and the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument, which wouldn't be so clear from theory" and "It was engaging and interacting" and "It was fun to take on the role of a supervisor, but it's hard to tell someone 'no'". Some of the students mentioned that the scenarios could have been clearer. These remarks were taken into account and used to update the contents of the scenarios in **Error! Reference source not found.** (Appendix 1).

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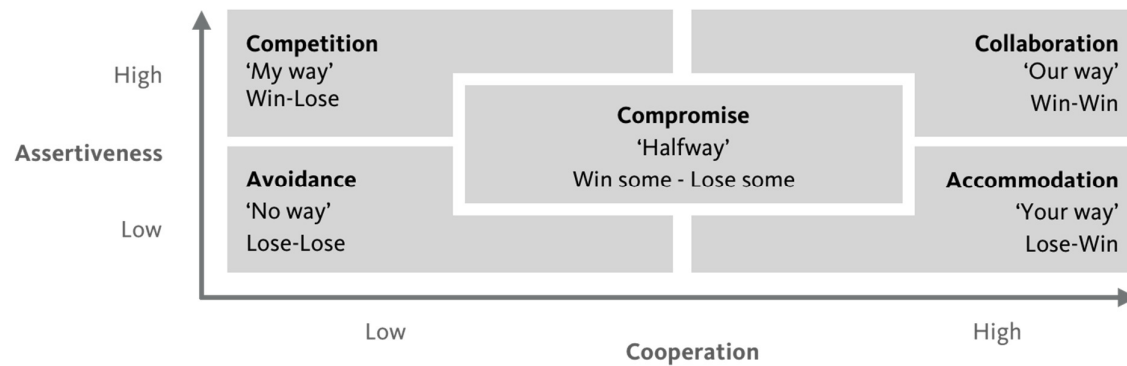
APPENDIX I: Figures and Tables

Figure 1. Conflict resolution strategies and outcomes
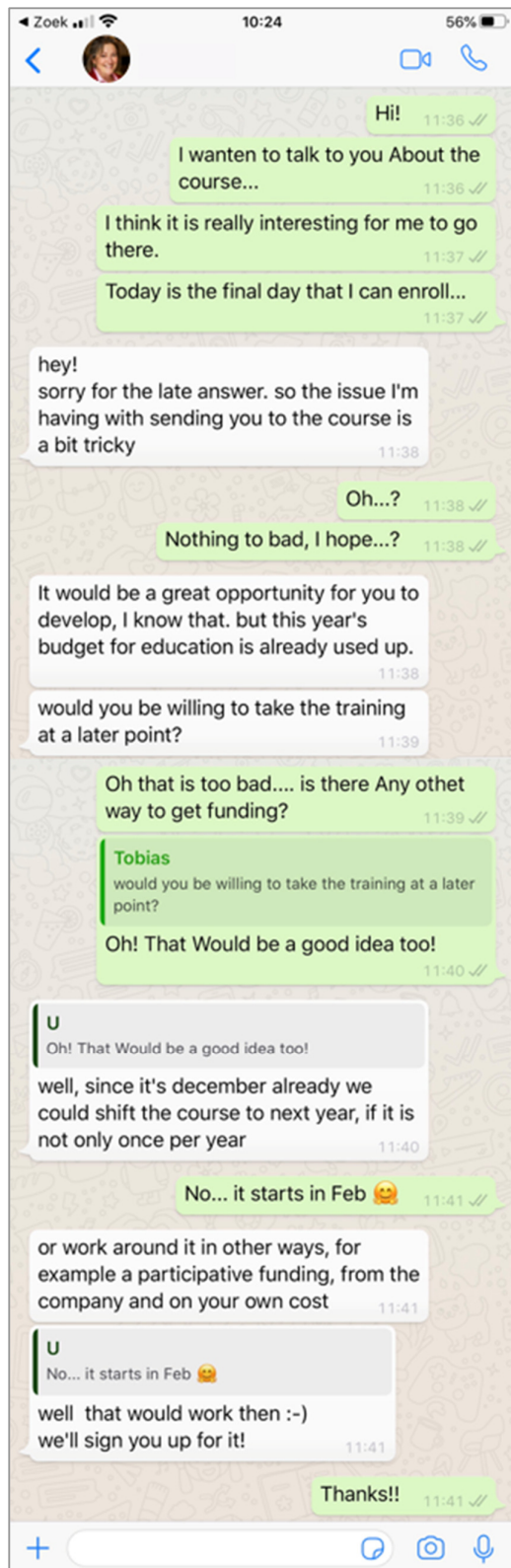

Figure 2. Outcomes of the conversation

Figure 3. Whatsapp conversation within the collaborative conflict resolution strategy

Table 1. Overview of scenarios

		Manager	Employee
Introduction		Last week, one of your employees asked for your permission to follow a course. The course is of good quality but it also is quite expensive. You have not yet responded to the request.	Last week, you asked your manager for permission to follow a course. The course is of good quality but it also is quite expensive. Your manager has not yet responded to your request.
Competing	□	It is not possible for the employee to attend the course because you really have to stick to the budget for education: currently, the budget is exhausted. Moreover, you do not owe this employee any favors.	You really want to attend this course because it will hugely increase the possibility to develop your career. You really don't care if your supervisor exceeds the budget for education as long as you can attend the course.
Avoiding	O	You really do not want to talk to your employee because you will be exceeding the budget if you allow the employee to go to this course. In addition, you do not owe this employee any favors.	You really do not want to talk to your supervisor as you are afraid to get a negative response. You suspect that the budget is 10lready exhausted. Hopefully, you can attend the course anyway.
Compromising	◇	The problem is that the budget for education for this year is exhausted and it is important that you do not exceed the budget. On the other hand, this course provides an opportunity for your employee to further develop.	You would like to attend the course because you think it would be a good career opportunity. At the same time you understand that your supervisor has to deal with budgets.
Accommodating	△	You realize that you are exceeding the budget if you allow the employee to go to this course. On the other hand, this course increases the chances of your employee to get a promotion. Moreover, your employee is a hard worker so (s)he does deserve a reward.	The course may be interesting to develop your career but you understand that your supervisor is not allowed to exceed the budget for education. You do not really have any arguments up your sleeve as to why you should be allowed to attend the course.
Collaborating	+	It really is not possible because you have to stick to the budget and it is exhausted. On the other hand, this course will motivate your employee. Moreover, your employee is a hard worker so (s)he deserves a reward. Maybe you can reach a smart agreement.	You really want to attend this course because it will hugely increase the possibility to develop your career. On the other hand, you understand that your supervisor is not allowed to exceed the budget for education. You need to come up with a smart solution.
The request		Today is the final day to enroll for the course. Your employee is sending you an app and asks for your final decision.	Today is the final day to enroll for the course. You send an app to your supervisor to ask for a final decision.

APPENDIX 2: Contents of the introductory slides

Slide 1: Introduction
- The purpose of the simulation is to find out the effect of different conflict strategies.
- How do people communicate and what are the results of a negotiation?
- How can we relate conflict strategies to communication behavior?

Slide 2: Simulation set up
- You will each receive a card that describes a situation that can potentially lead to a conflict.
  - Make couples: one of you is supervisor and one is employee
  - If there are three of you, one will observe
- Read the description and take a few moments to decide how you are going to convince the other party.
- Take ten minutes to talk to each other through WhatsApp.
- The employee starts the conversation.

Slide 3: Manipulation
- Contents of **Error! Reference source not found.** - to be presented after the conversation

APPENDIX 3: Five pairs of scenarios that describe different conflict strategies

Manager

Last week, one of your employees asked for your permission to follow a course. The course is of good quality but it also is quite expensive. You have not yet responded to the request.

It is not possible for the employee to attend the course because you really have to stick to the budget for education: currently, the budget is exhausted. Moreover, you do not owe this employee any favours.

Today is the final day to enroll for the course. Your employee is sending you an app and asks for your final decision.

Employee

Last week, you asked your supervisor for permission to follow a course. The course is of good quality but it also is quite expensive. Your supervisor has not yet responded to your request.

You really want to attend this course because it will hugely increase the possibility to develop your career. You really don't care if your supervisor exceeds the budget for education as long as you can attend the course.

Today is the final day to enroll for the course. You send an app to your supervisor to ask for a final decision.

Manager

Last week, one of your employees asked for your permission to follow a course. The course is of good quality but it also is quite expensive. You have not yet responded to the request.

You realize that you are exceeding the budget if you allow the employee to go to this course. In addition, you do not owe this employee any favors.

Today is the final day to enroll for the course. Your employee is sending you an app and asks for your final decision.

Employee

Last week, you asked your supervisor for permission to follow a course. The course is of good quality but it also is quite expensive. Your supervisor has not yet responded to your request.

The course might be interesting to develop your career. You do not really care if your supervisor exceeds the budget for education. Hopefully, you can attend the course.

Today is the final day to enroll for the course. You send an app to your supervisor to ask for a final decision.

Print the cards double sided with a story on the front and a symbol on the back. You need one set (two pages front and back) for every ten students. Cut the cards. Keep the employee and manager card for a specific strategy together.

APPENDIX 3 (Cont'd): Five pairs of scenarios that describe different conflict strategies
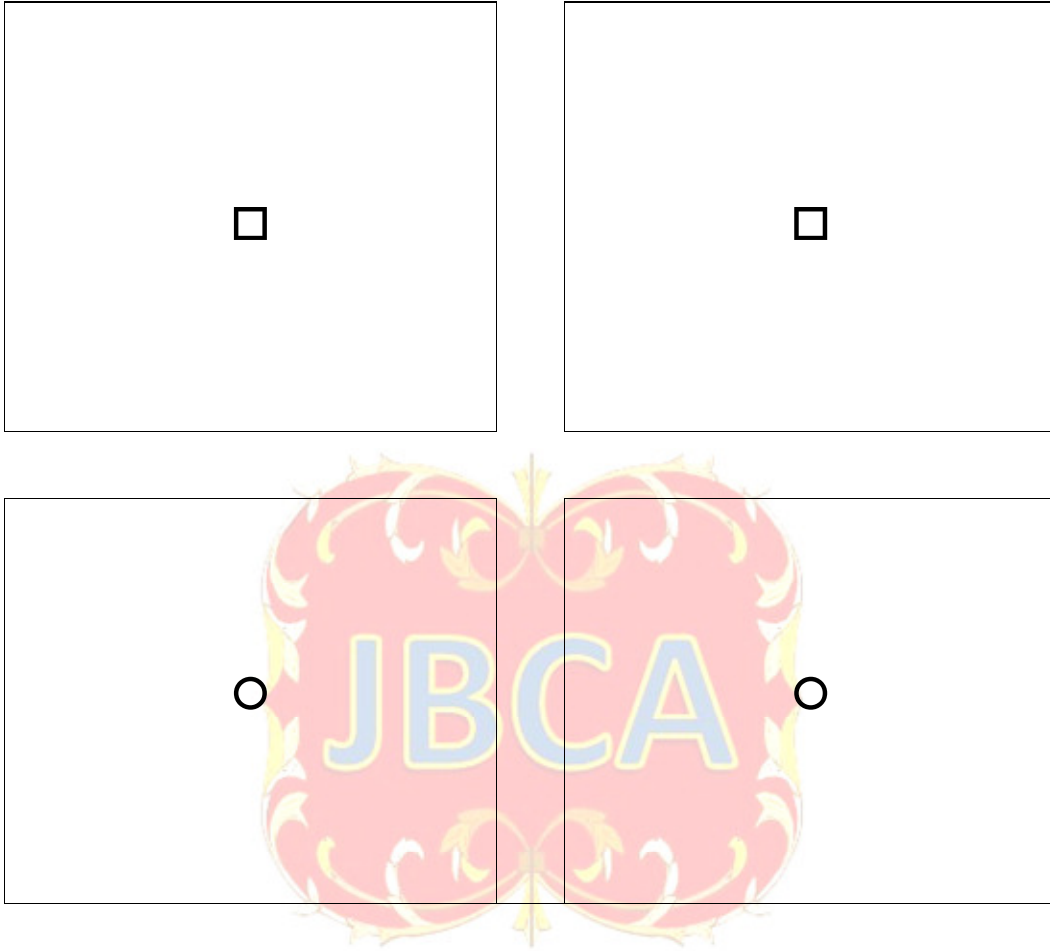
The symbols on the back of the cards correspond with the different strategies: compete is square, avoid is circle, compromise is diamond, accommodate is triangle and collaborate is a plus sign. We use symbols so that students rely on the real-life story rather than the theoretical notion. It is only after the simpulation that we provide students with the key.

APPENDIX 3 (Cont'd): Five pairs of scenarios that describe different conflict strategies

Manager

Last week, one of your employees asked for your permission to follow a course. The course is of good quality but it also is quite expensive. You have not yet responded to the request.

The problem is that the budget for education for this year is exhausted and it is important that you do not exceed the budget. On the other hand, this course provides an opportunity for your employee to further develop.

Today is the final day to enroll for the course. Your employee is sending you an app and asks for your final decision.

Employee

Last week, you asked your supervisor for permission to follow a course. The course is of good quality but it also is quite expensive. Your supervisor has not yet responded to your request.

You would like to attend the course because you think it is really interesting but at the same time you understand that your supervisor has to deal with budgets.

Today is the final day to enroll for the course. You send an app to your supervisor to ask for a final decision.

Manager

Last week, one of your employees asked for your permission to follow a course. The course is of good quality but it also is quite expensive. You have not yet responded to the request.

You realize that you are exceeding the budget if you allow the employee to go to this course. On the other hand, this course increases the chances of your employee to get a promotion. Moreover, your employee is a hard worker so (s)he does deserve a reward.

Today is the final day to enroll for the course. Your employee is sending you an app and asks for your final decision.

Employee

Last week, you asked your supervisor for permission to follow a course. The course is of good quality but it also is quite expensive. Your supervisor has not yet responded to your request.

The course may be interesting to develop your career but you understand that your supervisor is not allowed to exceed the budget for education. You do not really have any arguments up your sleeve as to why you should be allowed to attend the course.

Today is the final day to enroll for the course. You send an app to your supervisor to ask for a final decision.

Manager

Last week, one of your employees asked for your permission to follow a course. The course is of good quality but it also is quite expensive. You have not yet responded to the request.

It really is not possible because you have to stick to the budget for education. It is December and the budget is exhausted. On the other hand, this course increases the chances of your employee to get a promotion. Moreover, your employee is a hard worker so (s)he does deserve a reward.
Today is the final day to enroll for the course. Your employee is sending you an app and asks for your final decision.

Employee

Last week, you asked your supervisor for permission to follow a course. The course is of good quality but it also is quite expensive. Your supervisor has not yet responded to your request.

You really want to attend this course because it will hugely increase the possibility to develop your career. You understand that your supervisor is not allowed to exceed the budget for education. You need to come up with a smart solution.

Today is the final day to enroll for the course. You send an app to your supervisor to ask for a final decision.

APPENDIX 3 (Cont'd): Five pairs of scenarios that describe different conflict strategies