Insider – Managing Conflict in the Buyer-Seller Relationship

By Drew Johns, M.B.A. Candidate

Approximately one in every six hours of a salesperson's or agent's time is spent dealing with conflict (Bradford and Weitz 2009, p. 35). The difference between losing a client and developing a long-term win-win relationship can rely solely on the way one manages conflict. Trust and commitment are two key components of a successful relationship. A salesperson or agent who is able to cultivate these values in a relationship and successfully react to turbulence will be able to build a solid network of clients. In Salespersons' Management of Conflict in Buyer-Seller Relationships (published in 2009 in the Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management), Professors Kevin Bradford and Bart Weitz examine how to improve the buyer-seller relationship by tailoring the conflict management approach to the specific conflict at hand.

The following are five steps that a residential real estate agent or other salesperson should consider when dealing with conflict management:

**Think Point #1:** The first phase of successfully managing conflict lies within the salesperson's ability to sense and detect conflict in the buyer-seller relationship. Conflict "arises when one party obstructs, interferes, impedes, blocks, frustrates, or makes less effective the behavior of the other" (Bradford and Weitz 2009, p. 26). If the actions of one party have the potential to prevent the other party from obtaining its goals, a disagreement is likely to surface. When equipped with a basic conflict management skill set, the proactive agent will be able to react to arising issues before they become problem areas, leading to a hardy relationship.

**Think Point #2:** When a variance in attitude or judgment appears, the salesperson or agent should try to identify the actual issue at stake. Most types of conflict can either be classified as task or relational. A task conflict arises when the parties disagree over what process is necessary to accomplish the task. If a seller and an agent have differing views on the marketing strategy that will attract the most activity for generating interest in a home listing, a task conflict is present. Relational conflict is present when there is an inconsistency between the beliefs and emotions of the parties. If a female seller and a male agent are working together, the female may want to deal with her agent in a sincere and compassionate manner. If the male agent is unable to acknowledge her
needs, a relational conflict may arise. Categorizing the type of conflict correctly is important to ensure that the best treatment is applied. If one diagnoses the illness incorrectly, a cure is unlikely to be found.

**Think Point #3:** The salesperson must understand four basic conflict response strategies in order to select the proper approach.

1. Accommodation strategy – satisfying the other party's interest, while neglecting one's own needs
2. Compromise strategy – attempting to meet in the middle, or arrive at a solution that somewhat satisfies each party
3. Collaboration strategy – searching for an integrative, win-win resolution that fully satisfies the concerns of each party
4. Confrontation strategy – satisfying one's own objectives, while disregarding the needs of the other party If one is able to learn and understand each one of these strategies, s/he will be able to analyze a situation and find the suitable solution faster and more efficiently.

**Think Point #4:** Each situation should be scrutinized with care. **There is not a single cure-all remedy for each type of conflict.** Bradford and Weitz (2009) found a positive correlation between the various types of conflicts and all of these strategies. When arbitrating a task conflict, behaviors associated with the collaboration and confrontation strategies can have a constructive effect. A relationship that is open to communication and differing viewpoints will likely require a high level of interaction. This interaction is what lays a steady foundation upon which a solid relationship is built. When arbitrating a relational conflict which is typically emotional in nature, behaviors associated with accommodation and compromise strategies can help ease the ill mindset of the parties. Listening to the viewpoints and understanding the feelings of the opposing party will enable a salesperson to build rapport, respect, and trust with the client.

**Think Point #5:** Developing relationships provides considerable benefit for both buyer and seller, but it also comes with some unexpected costs. If a salesperson or agent is able to understand the sources of conflict and options for best managing conflict, they will be able to positively shape the buyer-seller relationship. "Conflict can serve as a medium through which problems can be aired and solutions derived. It can also enhance the ability of each party to work together to adapt, grow, and seize new opportunities" (Bradford and Weitz, p. 26).
Recommended Reading


About The Author

Drew Johns, M.B.A. Candidate, May 2011, Baylor University Graduate Assistant, Keller Center for Research. Drew is a first-year graduate student from Mansfield, TX. He earned his BBA with a major in finance from Baylor University.