

**Navigating Competing Obligations and Negotiations: A Case Study of Ray and
Shawna**

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Introduction

Ray, a teacher, and Shawna, an investor, are both juggling challenging careers while managing multiple family obligations. When there are multiple competing priorities in a relationship, conflict naturally arises as each partner navigates the tension between professional obligations and family responsibilities. The primary conflict in this case study is the tension between Ray and Shawna's work responsibilities and their family duties, with differing expectations and obligations they would like to meet, while also feeling regret for opportunities they cannot pursue or experiences they may miss with their children. For example, Shawna struggles with leaving Maria to attend her aerobics class, and Ray is torn between attending the Halloween carnival for his students and staying home to care for the children. While Ray and Shawna have a conflict with each other, they also face internal conflicts with the roles they take on.

Despite these pressures, the conflict is largely constructive because Ray and Shawna engage in compromising styles, consistent with Rahim's dual concern model of managing conflicts for oneself and for others (Hocker et al., 2021, Chapter 5). They openly communicate their needs, negotiate responsibilities, and develop plans that allow both parties to meet critical obligations. One example: Ray takes Maria to the carnival while Shawna makes client calls and stays with Chuy, and Shawna takes the kids to the grocery while Ray works on lesson plans. Their ability to recognize each other's concerns and revise plans shows a constructive conflict dynamic that balances self-interest with concern for the other, ultimately leading to a positive outcome.

Styles and Tactics Assessment

Ray and Shawna use a variety of conflict styles and tactics in order to manage their multiple obligations as employees, partners, and parents, which includes collaboration, compromise, and work-family conflict management (Hocker et al., 2021, Chapter 5). They both realize the importance of overcoming personal obstacles and communicating effectively to prevent conflicts from arising or escalating, and they understand that this is a temporary challenge that requires ongoing negotiation, flexibility, and mutual support to balance family and professional responsibilities successfully.

To successfully navigate the busy weekend while also fulfilling their personal obligations, Ray and Shawna had to collaborate and compromise on how to allocate responsibilities and coordinate their schedules. They engaged in active listening, considering each other's priorities and underlying interests, which allowed them to identify solutions that satisfied both partners, or at least as much as possible given the circumstances (Chen & Dong, 2021). Ray says, "We can work it out. Why don't I take Maria with me to the carnival while Chuy is napping, and you can make your phone calls? Then we'll come back and pick you and Chuy up on the way to the recital,' or, '...I will take them shopping while you work on your classes'" (Braithwaite et al., 2000, p. 149). They used compromise when negotiating child hand-offs so that the other person could get work done. The limitation to compromise is perceived fairness: while it was not addressed in the case study, if Ray had learned that Shawna had almost immediately booked her client, whereas he refused to do his mom a favor and mow her lawn, it could have created feelings of imbalance or resentment, highlighting that compromise calls for mutual respect and fair give-and-take.

Work-family conflict management was evident when urgent tasks, such as Shawna's investor meetings or Ray's carnival visit, required one partner to make a decision without consulting the other. For example, Shawna booked a client meeting despite previously making family plans: "I am free to meet at one o'clock, but I do have another engagement on Sunday afternoon. Is that time okay with you?' They agreed, and she hoped that Ray would understand" (Braithwaite et al., 2000, p. 151). The case study provides a limited view of the power dynamics between Ray and Shawna and of whether independent decisions based on their professional careers are common. Given the names provided, i.e., Raymos, Maria, Chuy, and Roberto, the family may reflect a Latino cultural background, where family obligations and respect for elders, i.e., Ray's mother's favor, are highly valued (Hocker et al., 2021, Chapter 9). Shawna's urgency in scheduling the client stems from her desire to improve her family's current situation; however, Ray perceives it as Shawna "always putting [her] career ahead of me and the children (Braithwaite et al., 2000, p. 151).

By alternating between these conflict styles, Ray and Shawna were able to manage their multiple roles, support each other's professional and personal priorities, and maintain a constructive, positive family dynamic throughout the weekend, all the while sheltering their children from the stress and tension that adult conflicts could create, making sure that Maria and Chuy experienced a sense of stability, enjoyment, and parental attention despite the busy weekend schedule.

Course Material Application

It is important to acknowledge how family-of-origin patterns and culture can affect conflict management and emotions. Research suggests that conflict styles used by

one's parents often carry over into adult romantic relationships, sometimes unconsciously replicating positive or destructive patterns (Busby et al., 2017). This can be seen in Ray's approach to conflict: "At first, Ray wasn't ready to stop arguing. He was still angry. It always took him longer to recover from an argument than it did Shawna. It took some effort, but he finally calmed down" (Braithwaite et al., 2000, p. 152). This shows the difference in how Ray and Shawna handle emotions and approach conflict resolution. While the case study does not go into depth on how Ray calmed down, recognizing these tendencies can help him intentionally adopt more constructive approaches, such as taking time to calm down and avoiding impulsive reactions. These strategies help prevent small disagreements from escalating and model healthy behaviors for their children. Research shows that children exposed to family conflict are at a greater risk for internalizing behaviors, such as anxiety or social withdrawal, and externalizing behaviors, such as aggression (Huang et al., 2024).

Negotiation is a common practice, occurring daily in interactions with others and varying in magnitude depending on the situation, like when Shawna recognizes the need to adjust her plans to be fair to her partner:

At the same time, Shawna realized that she wasn't being fair to Ray. He really did need her to be home on Sunday, and he had given her the time she needed to make her phone calls. So she said, "Ray, I'm sorry. You're right. I did promise. Sometimes I get too focused on making money and being successful. I'll call and reschedule the appointment for the morning (Braithwaite et al., 2000, p. 151).

In this exchange, Shawna uses "I" statements to take responsibility for her actions and acknowledge her role in the conflict (Hocker et al., 2021, Chapter 4). This approach

lowers defensiveness, fosters open communication, and helps move the negotiation toward a mutually satisfactory solution by emphasizing her perspective and willingness to adjust her plans, rather than blaming Ray or escalating the disagreement.

Conclusion

Ray and Shawna's case study demonstrates the challenges of managing work-family conflict while maintaining a healthy relationship. To keep their conflicts in the "mid-range" zone of emotional intensity, they could benefit from strategies that emphasize mindfulness, compassionate communication, and intentional regulation of emotional responses (Hocker et al., 2021, Chapter 6). For example, when Ray takes longer to calm down after an argument, he could verbally acknowledge his anger, distinguishing between venting and constructive expression. Both partners can benefit from continuing to use "I" statements to express their needs and take responsibility for their actions (Hocker et al., 2021, Chapter 4). Maintaining mid-range conflict involves control of emotions, allowing both partners to experience and communicate their feelings while avoiding escalatory negative spirals. Effective regulation not only protects their children's emotional and behavioral development, but also models strategies for negotiation, empathy, and respectful problem-solving that can extend into the children's own interpersonal relationships (Huang et al., 2024). Ultimately, intentionally regulating conflict in this mid-range zone enables them to address challenges, express anger responsibly, and maintain a balanced, resilient family dynamic despite competing professional and personal demands (Hocker et al., 2021, Chapter 6).

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