



DISCERNING LEADERSHIP

MINISTRY FOR SERVICE AND RESPONSIBILITY

Five Ways to Approach Conflict



Five Ways to Approach Conflict¹

The Thomas Kilmann Conflict Management Instrument is a self-report questionnaire designed to help one gain awareness of how they deal with interpersonal conflict. The model identifies various common ways (or personal preferences) of handling conflict and explores the benefits and potential downsides of these choices with the aim of expanding one's range in approaching conflict situations in a more discerning and constructive manner.

A version of this instrument can be found on the link here:

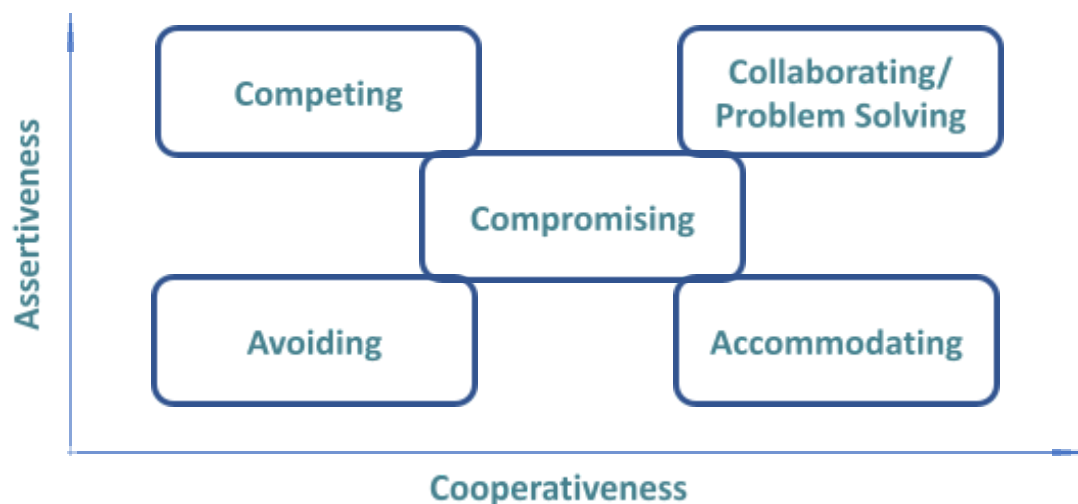
<https://www.usip.org/public-education-new/conflict-styles-assessment>

In conflict situations, we can often describe a person's behavior 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.

The combination of these two dimensions in various degrees helps to define five modes of handling conflict, each characterized by underlying intentions as well as specific behaviors and choices that one often resorts to in conflict situations.

These five conflict-handling modes are shown below:



It is important to remember that none of us are characterized by only one style. We use each of them to best approach a challenging situation. In fact, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to managing every conflict. Each of the five approaches has its own sets of benefits and costs as described on the following pages.

When applied appropriately in the right situation, any of these modes can be highly fruitful and effective. The ability to transform a conflict situation thus depends on recognizing the advantages of each style, understanding when to deploy them in ways that minimize their potential negative impact and expanding one's capacity to enact each one of them proficiently.

As you go through the description of each style and the reflection questions that follow, bring to mind your own context and experience. What insights, invitations or opportunities emerge?

¹ This document and descriptions are based on the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI)

Competing

Competing is a conflict style that shows up when a person is assertive but not cooperative. It is a power-driven approach where someone prioritizes their own goals, often at the expense of others. This style may involve using authority, influence, or persistence to secure an outcome. Competing can look like standing firm on your rights, defending a belief you consider correct, or striving to come out ahead in a disagreement.

How does this approach show up practically?	Benefits of Competing	Costs of overusing Competing	Underuse of Competing could cause...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Arguing or debating - Using rank, position or influence - Resorting to threats - Asserting your opinions or feelings - Standing your ground - Stating your position clearly 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Take quick action - Make unpopular decisions - Stand for vital issues - Protect your interests - Allows you to challenge and test others' assumptions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Can harm relationships, motivation and empowerment - Miss receiving feedback and reduced learning - Can harbor resentment in others - Suboptimal Decisions - Deadlock and escalation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Restricted influence - Mirror indecision - Delayed action especially in emergencies - Withholding contributions - Lack of direction when consensus fails

Collaborating/Problem Solving

Collaborating, sometimes referred to as problem solving, occurs when a person is both assertive and cooperative. In this approach, the goal is to work together to find a solution that addresses the needs of all involved. It requires a deeper exploration of the issue, identifying the real concerns of both parties, and creating a resolution that works for everyone. Collaboration might involve learning from one another's perspectives, sharing resources instead of fighting over them, or brainstorming new options to overcome interpersonal challenges.

How does this approach show up practically?	Benefits of Collaborating	Costs of overusing Collaborating	Underuse of Collaborating could cause...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ability to listen, understand and empathize - Nonthreatening confrontation - Extensive effort to satisfy all desires. - Input analysis and sharing - Identifying underlying concerns - Looking for alternative solutions together 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Integrating perspectives and improving initial positions - Releasing creativity - Open information exchange and learning - Gaining commitment from joint efforts - Strengthening relationships - Progress on complex unresolved issues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Time consuming for trivial matters - Drains emotional energy - Diffused responsibility - Risk of becoming everyone's problem solver - Work overload - Risk of others exploiting flexibility and openness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mutual gains deprivation - Lack of commitment - Low empowerment - Loss of innovation

Compromising

Compromising falls in the middle ground of assertiveness and cooperation. This style focuses on reaching a practical and acceptable solution that partially satisfies both sides. It typically involves mutual concessions—each party gives up something in order to gain something else. Compromising goes further than avoidance by addressing the matter, but it doesn't dive as deeply as collaboration. Common examples include splitting the difference, negotiating trade-offs, or settling quickly on a fair middle ground.

How does this approach show up practically?	Benefits of Compromising	Costs of overusing Compromising	Underuse of Compromising could
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			cause...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Negotiating - Finding a good middle ground - Making concessions - Assessing value - Meeting half-way 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Resolves issues of moderate importance - Achieves fair/acceptable deals - Balanced gains and losses for both parties. - Creates temporary solutions - Deals with time constraints - Good fall back position - Reduces tension 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Loss of the big picture perspective - Residual frustration and lack of trust - Risk of appearing weak - Cynical climate due to a superficial agreement - Oversimplifying differences - Suboptimal Solutions - Issues to possibly reemerge 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Unnecessary confrontations - Frequent power struggles - Inability to negotiate effectively

Avoiding

Avoiding is used when someone is neither assertive nor cooperative. While it may seem negative, it often reflects a decision to delay or sidestep conflict until the timing is better. In this mode, the individual does not actively pursue their own concerns or those of the other party. Avoidance may take the form of putting off the discussion, stepping aside diplomatically, or even withdrawing from a tense situation entirely.

How does this approach show up practically?	Benefits of Avoiding	Costs of overusing Avoiding	Underuse of Avoiding could cause...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Withdrawing - Switching topics - Leaving the room - Sidestepping difficult topics or people - Refraining from intervening directly - Watch the situation play itself out - Ability to leave things unresolved 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Leaving unimportant issues alone - Reducing tensions and stress - Buying time to set up more favorable conditions - Knowing your limitations - Steering clear of danger - Allowing others ownership - Recognizing issues as symptoms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of input from you - Can hinder progress - Can foster stereotypes - Decisions made by default - Fester issues - Climate of caution 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Hostility/hurt feelings because of excessive confrontation - Work overload, too many causes to address - Lack of prioritization/delegation

Accommodating

Accommodating appears when a person is cooperative but unassertive, making it the opposite of competing. This style emphasizes meeting the other person's needs, sometimes at the cost of one's own. It often involves self-sacrifice or putting aside personal preferences for the sake of harmony. Examples include yielding to another viewpoint, following someone's direction despite having reservations, or choosing to give generously without expecting anything in return.

How does this approach show up practically?	Benefits of Accommodating	Costs of overusing Accommodating	Underuse of Accommodating could cause...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Forgoing your desires - Selflessness - Conceding gracefully - Obedience - Ability to yield - Retreating 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Showing reasonableness - Allows for damage control and making repairs - Supporting others' needs - Fostering goodwill - Keeping peace, restoring harmony - Maintaining perspective 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Overlooked ideas - Sacrificing one's values - Reduced motivation - Restricted influence, loss of respect from others - Loss of contribution - Anarchy - Risk of exploitation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of rapport - Low morale - By-the-book reputation - Inability to yield - Increasing losses and resistance in hopeless situations

Personal Reflection Questions for Journaling

1. Which style do you find yourself naturally leaning toward in conflict situations?

- a. What might be the 2-3 key strengths of this approach as applied to your own context and role? Can you recall a time when your preferred conflict style helped resolve a situation effectively? What did you learn from that experience?
 - b. What might be the risks or costs of your preferred approach? Have there been instances where your preferred style may have caused misunderstandings or unintended consequences? What were they?
 - c. In what particular situations might your preferred style be limiting growth and standing in the way of serving your mission?
2. Drawing from the various descriptions listed above, how comfortable are you with using other conflict styles? What assumptions or fears prevent you from exploring them more often? What could be the benefits of expanding your conflict style repertoire?
 - a. Is there a particular approach that you recognize as your **least** preferred? What makes it so uncomfortable for you?
 - b. What might be 1 or 2 strengths of this approach?
 - c. What might be 1 or 2 weaknesses of this approach?
 3. Consider someone in your community or your work environment who has a different style than you: What do you think is their most comfortable conflict style?
 - a. How might this difference in conflict approaches lead to misunderstandings?
 - b. How might this difference bear fruits for your community life and mission?
 4. Think of a conflict you had to navigate recently. How might leaning into a different style (e.g., collaborating instead of accommodating) have changed the outcome?
 5. What invitations or opportunities do you see for growth in your approach to conflict?

Reflection Questions for Your Sharing with your Team

Consider using this Conflict Style Framework as a way to discuss ways of managing conflict within your team. Sometimes, within a team, we focus on discussing specific tasks we need to achieve but don't spend enough time reflecting and sharing whether the way that our team communicates and handles conflict might support or not the completion of these tasks. Discussing how your team members approach conflict can help start a conversation about creating norms to support your team communication and relationships.

6. What styles do the members of your team naturally lean toward? What about the style of the team leader?
7. Based on your team member's individual approaches, what do you see as the primary style your team uses (as a collective) during challenging conversations?
 - a. How has your team's combination of styles influenced the way your team approaches conflict?
 - b. In what ways does your team approach conflict in productive ways and in what ways could your team improve?
8. Have each team member share practices or norms that might help them when it comes to discussing controversial or challenging topics for the team.

Examples might include:

- *creating an agenda so team members are not surprised by a topic*
- *giving each person the opportunity to share before starting a discussion*
- *providing reflection time within the context of the meeting*
- *playing the role of "devil's advocate" so all alternatives are discussed*