Managing Conflict and Disagreements

Conflict is part of any dynamic business organisation. It arises because people care and want to do their jobs well. Conflict is beneficial when the focus is on finding the best solution. It becomes destructive when the focus is on people and "winning at all costs."

Conflict arises because of limited resources; differing goals, responsibilities and priorities; and differing ideas or interpretations. Conflict is especially difficult when it does not produce mutually satisfying solutions and it becomes personal.

As a manager, your goal should be to avoid "win-lose" situations and to ensure productive resolution of conflict. Effectively working through conflict results in stronger working relationships and encourages creative solutions - while handling conflict inappropriately results in damaged relationships and inhibits the expression of valuable opinions.

Valuable tips

- Put yourself in the other person's situation and imagine how you would feel and react. Look at the other side before defending your own.
- At the beginning of a conflict discussion, express your desire for a resolution that is acceptable to both or all of you.
- Restate the positions held by those on both sides of a conflict: look at it as a conflict of ideas or approaches, rather than of people.
- Do not lecture about why you are right. Simply state your point of view.
- Bring conflict into the open without feeling that your leadership is threatened. When people disagree with you, analyse the reason for their position.
- Ask a neutral third party to help you and the conflicting party to talk through the problem. Your HR team will always help to mediate such a situation.
- When a conflict situation arises, discuss it with your manager. When you have handled it, seek feedback from him or her about how successful you have been.
- Allow individuals to vent their anger. Venting frustration allows them to get it out in the open and allows you to work through the conflict.
- Clearly tell the other person the things you both agree on before dealing with their points of disagreement. This approach provides a positive starting point and builds bridges between you.
- If the other person feels they are losing something or that you are being unfair, listen to what the person is saying; don't try to convince the person that he or she is wrong.
- Attack problems – not people.
- If a conflict escalates, call for a time out. Reconvene when you have both reduced your tension to a productive level and you have both regained your perspective.
- Instead of showing frustration, talk about it.
- Be willing to confront other individuals when you feel they have made an error.

Thomas Kilmann conflict mode instrument

Instructions

Consider situations in which you find your wishes differing from those of another person. How do you usually respond to such situations?

On the following pages are several pairs of statements describing possible behavioural responses. For each pair, please circle the "A" or "B" statement which is most characteristic of your own behaviour.

In many cases, neither the "A" nor the "B" statement may be very typical of your behaviour, but please select the response which you would be more likely to use.

Thomas-Kilmann conflict mode instrument

1. A.   There are times when I let others take responsibility for solving the problem.
   B.   Rather than negotiate the things on which we disagree, I try to stress those things upon which we both agree.
   ....

2. A.   I try to find a compromise solution.
   B.   I attempt to deal with all of the other person's concerns.
   ....

3. A.   I am usually firm in pursuing my goals.
   B.   I might try to soothe the other's feelings and preserve our relationship.
   ....

4. A.   I try to find a compromise solution.
   B.   I sometimes sacrifice my own wishes for the wishes of the other person.
   ....

5. A.   I consistently seek the other's help in working out a solution.
   B.   I try to do what is necessary to avoid useless tensions.
   ....

6. A.   I try to avoid creating unpleasantness for myself.
   B.   I try to win my position.
   ....

7. A.   I try to postpone the issue until I have had some time to think it over.
   B.   I give up some points in exchange for others.
   ....

8. A.   I am usually firm in pursuing my goals.
   B.   I attempt to get all concerns and issues immediately out in the open.
   ....

9. A.   I feel that differences are not always worth worrying about.
   B.   I make some effort to get my way.
   ....

10. A.   I am firm in pursuing my goals.
    B.   I try to find a compromise solution.
    ....

11. A.   I attempt to get all concerns and issues immediately out in the open.
    B.   I might try to soothe the other's feelings and preserve our relationship.
    ....

12. A.   I sometimes avoid taking positions which would create controversy.
    B.   I will let the other person have some of their positions if they let me have some of mine.
    ....

13. A.   I propose a middle ground.
    B.   I press to get my points made.
    ....

14. A.   I tell the other person my ideas and ask them for theirs.
    B.   I try to show the other person the logic and benefits of my position.
    ....

15. A.   I might try to soothe the other's feelings and preserve our relationship.
    B.   I try to do what is necessary to avoid tension.
    ....

16. A.   I try not to hurt the other's feelings.
    B.   I try to convince the other person of the merits of my position.
    ....

17. A. I am usually firm in pursuing my goals.
    B. I try to do what is necessary to avoid useless tension.
    ....

18. A. If it makes the other person happy, I might let him maintain their views.
    B. I will let the other person have some of their positions if they let me have some of mine.
    ....

19 A. I attempt to get all concerns and issues immediately out in the open.
    B. I try to postpone the issue until I have had some time to think it over.
    ....

20. A. I attempt to immediately work through our differences.
    B. I try to find a fair combination of gains and losses for both of us.
    ....

21. A. In approaching negotiations, I try to be considerate of the other person's wishes.
    B. I always lean toward a direct discussion of the problem.
    ....

22. A. I try to find a position that is intermediate between the other person's and mine.
    B. I assert my wishes.
    ....

23. A. I am very often concerned with satisfying all our wishes.
    B. There are times when I let others take responsibility for solving the problem.
    ....

24. A. If the other's position seems very important to them, I would try to meet their wishes.
    B. I try to get the other person to settle for a compromise.
    ....

25. A. I try to show the other person the logic and benefits of my position.
    B. In approaching negotiations, I try to be considerate of the other person's wishes.
    ....

26. A. I propose a middle ground.
    B. I am nearly always concerned with satisfying all our wishes.
    ....

27. A. I sometimes avoid taking positions that would create controversy.
    B. If it makes the other person happy, I might let them maintain their views.
    ....

28. A. I am usually firm in pursuing my goals.
    B. I usually seek the other's help in working out a solution.
    ....

29 A. I propose a middle ground.
    B. I feel that differences are not always worth worrying about.
    ....

30. A. I try not to hurt the other's feelings.
    B. I always share the problem with the other person so that we can work it out.

Thomas-Kilman Conflict Mode Instrument: Score Sheet

Circle the letters below which you circled on each item of the questionnaire.

	Competing (forcing)	Collaborating (problem solving)	Compromising (sharing)	Avoiding (withdrawal)	Accommodating (smoothing)
1				A	B
2		B	A		
3	A				B
4			A		B
5		A		B	
6	B			A	
7			B	A	
8	A	B			
9	B			A	
10	A		B		
11		A			B
12			B	A	
13	B		A		
14	B	A			
15				B	A
16	B				A
17	A			B	
18			B		A
19		A		B	
20		A	B		
21		B			A
22	B		A		
23		A		B	
24			B		A
25	A				B
26		B	A		
27				A	B
28	A	B			
29			A	B	
30		B			A

Total number of items circled in each column:

Competing	Collaborating	Compromising	Avoiding	Accommodating

Thomas Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument: Interpreting Your Scores

The Five Conflict Handling Modes

The Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument is designed to assess an individual's behaviour in conflict situations. "Conflict Situations" are situations in which the concerns of two people appear to be incompatible. In such situations we can describe a person's behaviour along two basic dimensions1: (1) assertiveness, the extent to which the individual attempt to satisfy his own concerns, and (2) cooperativeness, the extent to which the individual attempts to satisfy the other person's concerns. These two basic dimensions of behaviour can be used to define five specific methods of dealing with conflicts. These five "conflict-handling modes" are shown below.
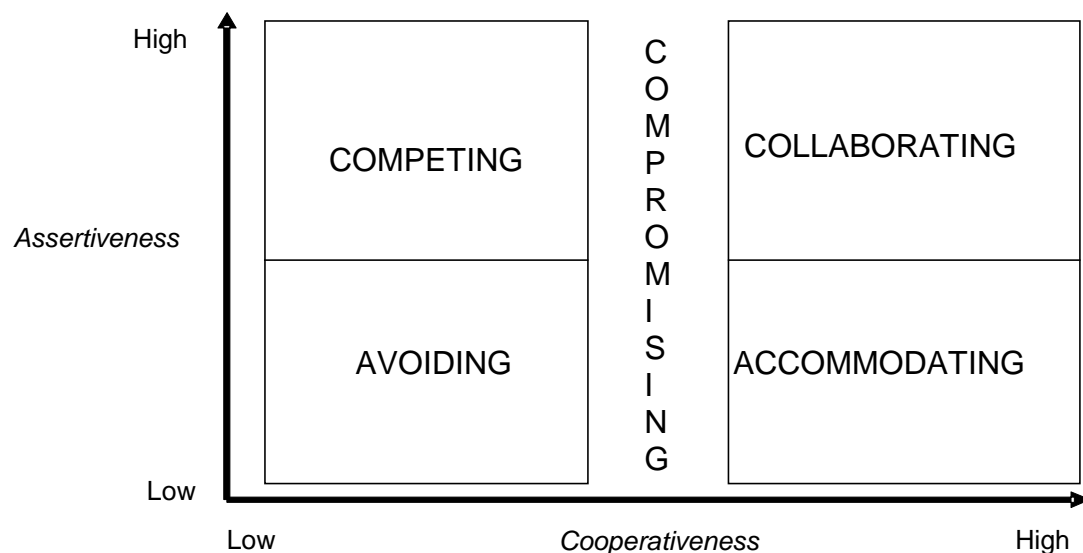
Competing: is assertive and uncooperative.

An individual pursues his own concerns at the other person's expense. This is a power-oriented mode, in which one uses whatever power seems appropriate to win one's own position - one's ability to argue, one's rank, economic sanctions. Competing might mean "standing up for your rights", defending a position which you believe is correct, or simply trying to win.

Accommodating: is unassertive and cooperative - the opposite of competing. When accommodating, an individual neglects his own concerns to satisfy the concerns of the other person; there is an element of self-sacrifice in this mode. Accommodating might take the form of selfless generosity or charity, obeying another person's order when one would prefer not to, or yielding to another's point of view.

This two dimensional model of conflict handling behaviour is adapted from "Conflict and Conflict Management" by Kenneth Thomas in Volume II of "The Handbook of Industrial and Organisational Psychology", edited by Marvin Dunnette (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1975). Another valuable contribution in this field is the work of Robert Blake and Jane Mouton in "The Managerial Grid" (Houston: Gulf Publishing, 1964).[1]

Avoiding: is unassertive and uncooperative. The individual does not immediately pursue his own concerns or those of the other person. He does not address the conflict. Avoiding might take the form of diplomatically sidestepping an issue, postponing an issue until a better time or simply withdrawing from a threatening situation.

Collaborating: is both assertive and cooperative - the opposite of avoiding.
Collaborating involves an attempt to work with the other person to find some solution which fully satisfies the concerns of both persons. It means digging into an issue to identify the underlying concerns of the two individuals and to find an alternative which meets both sets of concerns. Collaborating between two persons might take the form of exploring a disagreement to learn from each other's insights, concluding to resolve some condition which would otherwise have them competing for resources, or confronting and trying to find a creative solution to an interpersonal problem.

Compromising: is intermediate in both assertiveness and cooperativeness.
The object is to find some expedient, mutually acceptable solution which partially satisfies both parties. It falls on a middle ground between competing and accommodating. Compromising gives up more than competing but less than accommodating. Likewise, it addresses an issue more directly than avoiding, but doesn't explore it in as much depth as collaborating. Compromising might mean splitting the difference, exchanging concessions, or seeking a quick middle-ground position.

Using the Five Modes

Usually, after getting back the results of any test, people first want to know "what are the right answers?" In the case of conflict-handling behaviour, there are no universal right answers. All five modes are useful in some situations: each represents a set of useful social skills. Our conventional wisdom recognises, for example, that often "Two heads are better than one" (Collaborating). But is also says, "Kill your enemies with kindness" (Accommodating), "Split the difference" (Compromising), "Leave well enough alone" (Avoiding), "Might makes right" (Competing). The effectiveness of a given conflict-handling mode depends upon the requirements of the specific conflict situation and the skill with which the mode is used.

Each of us is capable of using all five conflict-handling modes: none of us can be characterised as having a single, rigid style of dealing with conflict. However, any given individual is more comfortable using certain modes than others and therefore, tends to rely upon those modes more heavily than others, whether because of temperament or practice.

The conflict behaviours which an individual uses are therefore a result of both his/her personal predispositions and the requirements of the situations in which he finds himself. The Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument is designed to assess this mix of conflict-handling modes.

Competing

Uses:
1. When quick, decisive action is vital e.g. emergencies.
2. On important issues where unpopular courses of action need implementing – e.g. cost cutting, enforcing unpopular rules, discipline.
3. On issues vital to company welfare when you know you're right.
4. To protect yourself against people who take advantage of non-competitive behaviour.

If you scored high:
- Are you surrounded by "yes" men?
  (If so, perhaps it's because they have learned that it's unwise to disagree with you, or have given up trying to influence you. This closes you off from information).

- Are subordinates afraid to admit ignorance and uncertainties to you?
  (In competitive climates, one must fight for influence and respect - which means acting more certain and confident than one feels. The upshot is that people are less able to ask for information and opinions - they are less able to learn).

If you scored low:
- Do you often feel powerless in situations?
  (It may be because you are unaware of the power you do have, unskilled in its use, or uncomfortable with the idea of using it. This may hinder your effectiveness by restricting your influence).
- Do you have trouble taking a firm stand, even when you see the need?
  (Sometimes concerns for others' feelings or anxieties about the use of power cause us to vacillate, which may mean postponing the decision and adding to the suffering and/or resentment of others).

Collaborating

Uses:

1. To find an integrative solution when both sets of concerns are too important to be compromised.
2. When your objective is to learn – e.g. testing your own assumptions, understanding the view of others.
3. To merge insights from people with different perspectives on a problem.
4. To gain commitment by incorporating other's concerns into a consensual decision.
5. To work through hard-felt feelings which do not interfere with the interpersonal relationship.

If you scored high:

- Do you spend time discussing issues in depth that do not seem to deserve it?
  (Collaboration takes time and energy - perhaps the scarcest organisational resources, Trivial problems don't require optimal solutions, and not all personal differences need to be thrashed out. The overuse of collaboration and consensual decision making sometimes represents a desire to minimise risk - by diffusing responsibility for a decision or by postponing action).
- Does your collaborative behaviour fail to elicit collaborative responses from others?
  (The exploratory and tentative nature of some collaborative behaviours may make it easy for others to disregard collaborative overtures; or the trust and openness may be taken advantage of. You may be missing some cues which would indicate the presence of defensiveness, strong feelings, impatience, competitiveness, or conflicting interest).

If you scored low:

- Is it hard for you to see differences as opportunities for joint gain - as opportunities to learn or solve problems?
  (Although there are often threatening or unproductive aspects of conflict, indiscriminate pessimism can prevent you from seeing collaborative possibilities and thus deprive you of the mutual gains and satisfactions which accompany successful collaboration).
- Are subordinates uncommitted to your decisions or policies?
  (Perhaps their own concerns are not being incorporated into those decisions or policies).

Compromising

Uses:
1. When goals are moderately important, but not worth the effort or potential disruption of more assertive modes.
2. When two opponents with equal power are strongly committed to mutually exclusive goals.
3. To achieve temporary settlements to complex issues.
4. To arrive at expedient solutions under time pressure.
5. As a backup mode when collaboration or competition fails to be successful.

If you scored high:
- Do you concentrate so heavily upon the practicalities and tactics of compromise that you sometimes lose sight of larger issues - principles, values, long-term objectives, company welfare?
- Does an emphasis on negotiating and trading create a cynical climate of gamesmanship?
  (Such a climate might undermine interpersonal trust and deflect attention away from the merits of the issues discussed).

If you scored low:
- Do you find yourself too sensitive or embarrassed to be effective in negotiation situations?
- Do you find it hard to make concessions?
  (Without this safety valve, you may have trouble getting gracefully out of mutually destructive arguments, power struggles, etc.).

Avoiding

Uses:

1. When an issue is trivial, of only passing importance, or when other more important issues are pressing.
2. When you perceive no chance of satisfying your concerns - eg when you have low power or you are frustrated by something which would be very difficult to change (national policies, someone's personality structure, etc).
3. When the potential damage of confronting a conflict outweighs the benefits of its resolution.
4. To let people cool down - to reduce tensions to a productive level and to regain perspective and composure.
5. When gathering more information outweighs the advantages of an immediate decision.
6. When others can resolve the conflict more effectively.
7. When the issue seems tangential or symptomatic of another more basic issue.

If you scored high:

- Does your coordination suffer because people have trouble getting your inputs on issues?
- Does it often appear that people are "walking on egg-shells"?
  (Sometimes a dysfunctional amount of energy can be devoted to caution and the avoiding of issues, indication that issues need to be faced and resolved).
- Are decisions on important issues made by default?

If you scored low:

- Do you find yourself hurting people's feelings or stirring up hostilities?
  (You may need to exercise more discretion in confronting issues or more tact in framing issues in non-threatening ways. Tact is partially the art of avoiding potentially disruptive aspects of an issue).
- Do you often feel harried or overwhelmed by a number of issues?
  (You may need to devote more time to setting priorities - deciding which issues are relatively unimportant and perhaps delegating them to others).

Accommodating

Uses:
1. When you realise that you are wrong - to allow a better position to be heard, to learn from others, and to show that you are reasonable.
2. When the issue is much more important to the other person than to yourself - to satisfy the needs of others, and as a goodwill gesture to help maintain a cooperative relationship.
3. To build up social credits for later issues which are important to you.
4. When continued competition would only damage your cause - when you are outmatched and losing.
5. When preserving harmony and avoiding disruption are especially important.
6. To aid in the managerial development of subordinates by allowing them to experiment and learn from their own mistakes.

If you scored high:
- Do you feel that your own ideas and concerns are not getting the attention they deserve?
  (Deferring too much to the concerns of others can deprive you of influence, respect, and recognition. It also deprives the organisation of your potential contributions).
- Is discipline lax?
  (Although discipline for its own sake may be of little value, there are often rules, procedures, and assignments whose implementation is crucial for you or the organisation).

If you scored low:
- Do you have trouble building goodwill with others?
  (Accommodation on minor issues which are important to others are gestures of goodwill).
- Do others often seem to regard you as unreasonable?
- Do you have trouble admitting it when you are wrong?
- Do you recognise legitimate exceptions to rules?
- Do you know when to give up?

Conflict-Handling Skills: 5 Modes

Mode	Common Phrases
Accommodating (smoothing)	I concede that point......... I agree with you there...... I am prepared to accept that..... I will do as you say...... I don't want to offend you...... What is your preferred outcome...... You have convinced me..... I am glad we agree on this......
Competing (forcing)	I'm not prepared to change my position...... I must make my position quite clear...... My view is clearly the most rational...... I am sure mine is the best way...... If you don't do this I'll...... I know best, you'd better...... Do as you're told!......
Avoiding (withdrawal)	I can't take responsibility for this decision..... I'd prefer not to discuss that now...... Let's talk about that later...... That is outside my brief..... I won't be drawn on that...... I'm not in a position to discuss...... I don't want to talk about...... I don't see your point......
Collaborating (problem solving)	Let's work together on this...... What is mutually acceptable..... What do we disagree about...... Let's find some common ground...... Let's investigate the problem...... My position is..... what's yours Where do we differ .... How can we solve this......
Compromising (sharing)	Let's find a quick solution...... I'll give you......, if you give me..... Let's split the difference...... I suggest we meet half way....... We can't both win, but let's not both lose....... Let's be satisfied with ...... I'm prepared to......, if you...... Let's both come away from this with something......