

Introduction TO CONFLICT and Teams



ENHANCING TEAM PERFORMANCE USING THE TKI

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INTRODUCTION

Researchers have discovered a number of requirements for high-performing teams including the following:

- Clear team goals
- Authority to accomplish assigned tasks
- Appropriate people on the team
- Ability to resolve conflict openly and constructively

This booklet focuses on the fourth requirement, that is, effective conflict management. Why is conflict management important to team performance? Inevitably, teams are made up of members who differ in personal characteristics and experience. To be effective as a team, however, those members must reach agreements on goals, make good decisions about how to achieve those goals, and help each other accomplish their activities—despite their differences. Being able to reconcile differences, then—to handle conflict constructively—is a key determinant of team effectiveness.

This booklet builds on your scores on the *Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument* (TKI). Part I is designed to help you and your teammates understand your individual team member styles of conflict and to suggest ways that you can increase your individual effectiveness as team members. Part II can then help

you identify your team’s style for dealing with conflict, based on the styles of the team’s members, and suggest ways to help the team function more effectively as a group.

What Is the TKI?

The TKI is the leading measure of conflict-handling modes. It was developed by Kenneth W. Thomas and Ralph H. Kilmann in the early 1970s and has been used in hundreds of research studies. It has sold more than four million copies.

One of the reasons for the TKI’s popularity is that it shows how each conflict mode can be useful for dealing with conflict in certain situations. The TKI, then, allows people to appreciate the value of their own conflict styles—but also to learn the value of other styles as well. In short, it allows people to build on their strengths.

The TKI has proven to be extremely helpful for team building. It is widely used for helping both new and established teams at all organizational levels—from shop floor work groups to boards of directors. It is also used across a wide variety of private and public sector organizations.

In new teams, the TKI helps members get acquainted with each other's conflict styles, identify potential challenges, and set goals for how they should handle conflict as a group.

In established teams, the TKI helps team members make sense of the different conflict behaviors that have been occurring within the team, identify the team's challenges in managing conflict, and find constructive ways to handle those challenges.

What Causes Conflict in Teams?

Conflicts are a fact of life in teams—they are no one's "fault." Conflict is simply the condition in which the concerns of different team members—the things they care about—appear to be incompatible. As Figure 1 shows, conflict occurs when two conditions are present—interdependence and differences.

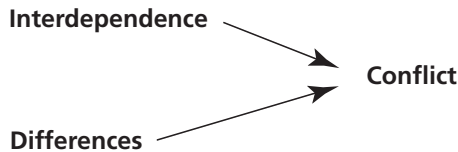


FIGURE 1 • ORIGINS OF CONFLICT

Interdependence exists when team members need to work together to satisfy their concerns. Interdependence is especially high in meetings when the team must make decisions that affect all members. So conflicts are common in these meetings—and not when team members are working independently.

Differences exist when team members have varying responsibilities, values, temperament, sources of information, or experience. With more differences, members bring more diverse concerns to team decision making, tending to create more conflict that needs to be reconciled. Although differences create more conflict within a team, they also provide an opportunity for richer understandings of an issue. For that reason, organizations often build differences into

decision-making teams to make sure that diverse perspectives are represented.

What Makes Conflict Positive or Negative?

Team conflict is not good or bad in itself. Rather it has the potential for both positive and negative outcomes.

Positive outcomes can result from more effective conflict management. Conflicts may surface and resolve key task issues for a team, producing high-quality decisions. Working through conflict issues can result in learning and innovation. Successfully resolving conflict issues can also remove sources of tension in a team, strengthening work relationships and group cohesiveness.

The key factor in producing positive conflict outcomes is how those conflicts are handled. Research shows that the conflict-handling modes used by a team make a greater impact on its effectiveness than the amount of conflict or differences in the team.

Negative outcomes are all too familiar. Team conflicts may result in poor decisions or in deadlocks that produce no decisions. Conflicts can waste the team's time and energy. They can create resentments that damage working relationships and undermine group cohesiveness. If they persist, these negative outcomes can lead to discouragement and apathy.

What Are the Conflict-Handling Modes?

The five conflict-handling modes measured by the TKI are shown in Figure 2. They are described in terms of two underlying dimensions—assertiveness and cooperativeness.

Assertiveness is the degree to which you try to satisfy your *own* concerns.

Cooperativeness is the degree to which you try to satisfy your *teammates'* concerns.

These five conflict-handling modes are the basic choices available to you when your concerns appear

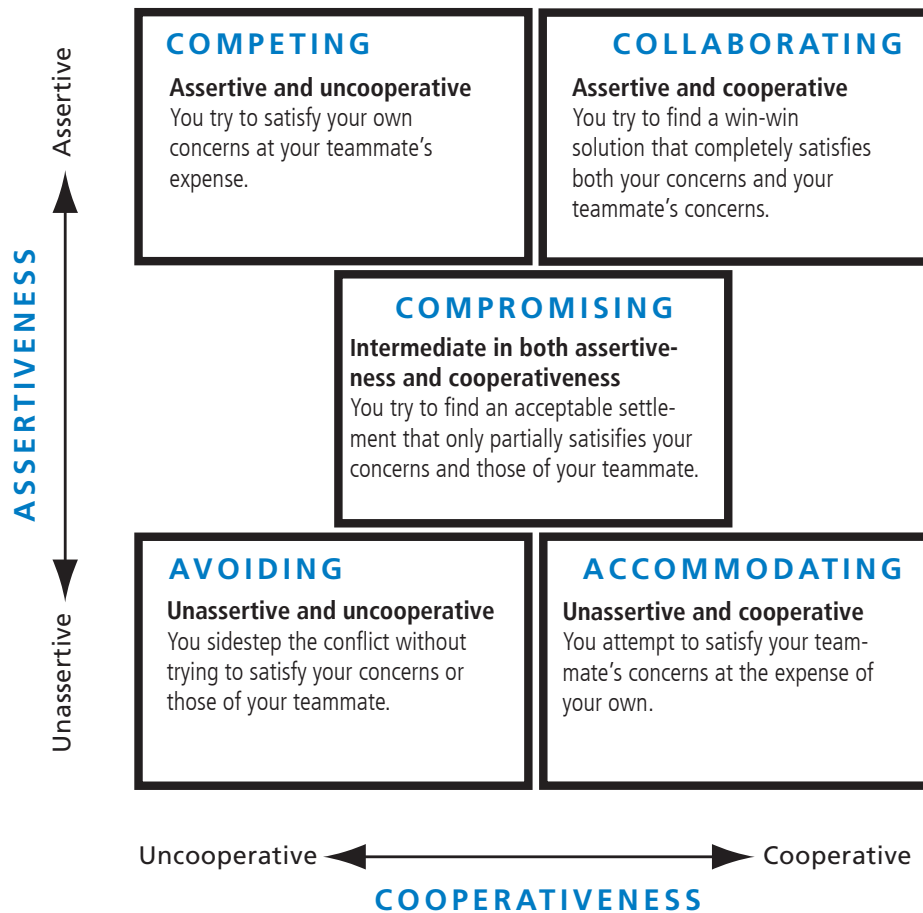


FIGURE 2 • CONFLICT-HANDLING MODES

to be incompatible with a teammate's. The focus of this booklet is to help you understand how you and your teammates tend to use these conflict modes—and to suggest ways of using them more effectively.

How Can I Get the Most from This Booklet?

To get the most from this booklet, you will need to read it actively. Look for ideas that give you key insights into your team member conflict style and your team's conflict style. Underlining key passages and making notes in the margins will help you complete the worksheets at the end of Parts I and II of this booklet.

Part I focuses on team member conflict styles. It will help you identify your style based on your TKI scores and will explain the strengths and limitations of that style. It will also point out the strengths of your teammates' styles and how you can constructively draw upon them. The worksheet at the end of Part I will give you a chance to put that information together and determine how you can improve your personal effectiveness in conflict management.

Part II helps identify your team's conflict style, based on the mix of its members' TKI scores. It will help your team understand the strengths and challenges of its style and suggest remedies that the team can take to improve its conflict-handling effectiveness. The worksheet at the end of Part II will give your team

a chance to decide on specific actions it can take to manage its conflict process more effectively.

Keep the booklet handy so that you and your teammates can refer back to it from time to time. We also suggest that your team select a person to keep track of

the conflict-handling goals the team sets for itself, to review periodically how well the team is meeting them, and to help the group set new conflict-handling goals as needed.

PART I

Team Member Conflict Styles

People are likely to use different conflict-handling modes at different times. However, most team members show a clear preference for some conflict modes over others. You probably use a dominant mode in your team—your favorite choice. Your team member conflict style can usually be described in terms of that dominant mode: competitor, collaborator, compromiser, avoider, or accommodator.

What's My Team Member Conflict Style?

The TKI helps you see the patterns in your choices of conflict-handling modes so that you can recognize your team member conflict style. Turn to page 10 of the TKI test booklet, "Graphing Your TKI Scores." See which conflict-handling mode got the highest percentile score—the one that is farthest "north" on the graph. This is your *dominant* mode. Write the word *Dominant* in the box that corresponds to your dominant style in Figure 3.

Your dominant mode is the one you go to most often—and the one you prefer to use. It feels most "natural" to you in a conflict situation. It is likely to

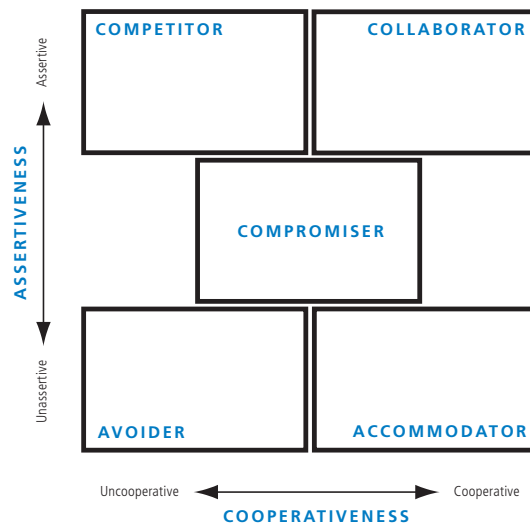


FIGURE 3 • YOUR TEAM MEMBER CONFLICT STYLE

be the best fit with your personality, beliefs, and values. Because you practice it most often, you are also likely to be most skillful at this mode, which adds to your comfort in using it. In contrast, you are likely to feel more reluctant, awkward, or uncomfortable when events require you to use your less-preferred conflict modes.

For most people, identifying a dominant conflict-handling mode is a sufficiently good measure of their team member conflict style. However, two special cases may arise:

Ties. If two conflict-handling modes are tied for highest percentile score, write the word *Dominant* in the appropriate boxes in Figure 3. Your style is an amalgam of both modes. Here, you are likely to feel relatively comfortable with both modes and both may seem equally valuable. You are likely to find ways of merging the two styles. For example, a team member who is dominant in both the collaborator and accommodator styles might act as a “supportive problem solver” or a “problem-solving helper.”

Close second. If a second mode is almost as high as your dominant mode—scoring within 10 percentile points of it—then you also have a strong *backup* mode. Write the word *Backup* in the appropriate box in Figure 3. This backup mode is a strong secondary influence on your conflict style. It is the mode you tend to go to when you feel that your dominant mode won’t work. You may feel some regret about having to use your backup mode but are reconciled to the idea that it is often necessary. Chances are that you are fairly skillful at your backup mode, but a bit less graceful or comfortable at it than you are with your dominant mode.*

Enter a description of your team member conflict style in the box below (e.g., “compromiser,” “compromiser and competitor,” or “collaborator with competitor backup”).

My team member conflict style:

* In rare cases, some team members have scores that are relatively evenly distributed across three or more modes. This “generalist” style is highly flexible. Choice of conflict modes is based on situational need, and there is no strong preference for any mode.

Recognizing Your Own and Your Teammates’ Conflict Styles

During a team meeting or in team interactions, team members’ conflict styles can show up on different kinds of issues:

Agenda: What topic or issue should we be dealing with, and for how long?

Truth: What are the facts about this topic or issue?

Goals: What should we be trying to accomplish? What is important?

Action: What should we do?

Figure 4 shows examples of how the conflict styles deal with these different types of issues. These are the external manifestations of the conflict styles—the overt, visible behaviors associated with each style.

Look at the behaviors listed for your dominant style. (If you have two dominant modes or a dominant and a backup mode, look at the behaviors for both.) Underline the phrases that fit your behavior well. This is what you show your teammates when conflict arises.

Now think of one or two teammates with different conflict styles. See if you can recognize their behaviors in the figure as well. Notice that the behaviors listed for the five styles are quite different.

What’s Behind the Different Conflict Styles?

If you are like most people, your own conflict style seems to be very reasonable. You see it as a rather straightforward and sensible response to many conflict situations. You are also aware of the positive intentions behind your conflict style. You are trying to help in some way when you use that style—to help the team be more effective.

At the same time, you are sometimes surprised and frustrated by the behavior of teammates with different conflict styles. To deal constructively with other styles, it is important to understand where they come from and the contributions they are intended to make.

Interpersonal Relations

Avoider teams often sidestep personality conflicts or sensitive interpersonal issues. This tendency can make interpersonal relations somewhat superficial or fragile and allow resentments to grow. However, these teams can improve relations by addressing the following challenges.

Challenges	Remedies
<p>Personality conflicts. Conflicts appear dangerous and unresolvable when they seem to involve the basic personalities or styles of team members. Rather than criticize a team member's personality, other members often allow the behavior to continue, while their resentments grow.</p>	<p>Focusing on specific behaviors. Rather than focus on personalities, which can evoke defensiveness—and personalities are relatively unchangeable anyway—the team leader and members can address specific behaviors that create problems for the team. In many cases, these are the “style overuse” behaviors listed earlier in Figure 7 (page 11).</p>
<p>Fight-or-flight cycles. Some teams get into a fight-or-flight pattern in which some members adopt angry or uncivil competitive behavior when questioned. These groups go through cycles of disruptive argument (fight), followed by a retreat to safe issues or small talk (flight). Here, avoiding is a response to group members who are difficult to confront.</p>	<p>Norms on anger, civility, and fairness. The team leader can establish norms to control expressions of anger and to ensure civil and fair behavior, following up with individual members as needed. These norms reduce the need to “walk on eggshells” around certain members and topics.</p>

ACCOMMODATOR TEAMS

Problem Solving

Accommodator teams place a high priority on group harmony, goodwill, and consideration of other members' feelings. When conflict issues arise, they excel at listening to other members' concerns and at trying to help them. However, members often encounter challenges in asserting their own concerns, challenging assumptions made by others, or saying things that others might find unpleasant.

Challenges

Difficulty asserting needs. Problem solving can be prevented or delayed when some members fail to state their own concerns or needs—in effect, ignoring a concern until it becomes too much to tolerate.

Conformity. For the sake of team harmony, members may experience social pressure to support the team's assumptions and recommendations, even when they have doubts about them. Members may voice doubts to each other after the meeting but still go along during the meeting, producing groupthink.

Reluctance to debate. Team members may feel especially uncomfortable about directly challenging other members' assumptions and conclusions and asserting the values of an alternative viewpoint—especially in an extended interchange.

Shading the truth. Members may find it difficult to criticize the team or each other, telling white lies and giving more positive feedback than is accurate. Leaders may inflate evaluations of member and team performance.

Trouble taking unpopular stands. Some leaders may find it difficult to take actions that make members unhappy in the short run—such as cutting budgets and enforcing rules. They may fear that such actions will undermine morale.

Remedies

Polling for needs. When an important issue arises, the leader can poll team members to ascertain their needs or concerns. The leader can emphasize that the goal is problem solving, not sacrifice, and that the team needs this information. The team can also watch for signs of undue sacrifice by any member.

Norms of critical thinking. The leader can emphasize that loyalty to the team is best shown by not allowing it to make a poor decision, asking team members to serve as “critical thinkers” on important issues. The leader can reinforce this norm by thanking members who raise questions.

Using structured debates. The leader can appoint a devil's advocate to critique a proposed action. The leader can also assign members to debate different positions. Because these roles are assigned, members' behaviors are less likely to appear personal or destructive.

Norms of truth-telling. The leader can emphasize the importance of telling each other the truth. Without truthful information, decision making suffers and team members cannot recognize when improvement is needed. The truth can still be given in a caring way.

Taking a long-term view. The leader can emphasize the longer-term beneficial effects of these actions. In the long term, sound decisions will increase the welfare of the team and its members—a more effective way of supporting the team and building morale.

Interpersonal Relations

Because they make it a priority, accommodator teams tend to have good interpersonal relations, with high cohesiveness, a sense of interpersonal security, and mutual regard. However, the kindness and consideration that members show each other in these teams sometimes lead to the following challenges.

Challenges	Remedies
<p>Unvoiced resentments. Members who accommodate out of kindness or politeness may come to feel that they are being taken advantage of when others do not reciprocate. Unvoiced resentments can heat up and may occasionally boil over into accusations of selfishness or ingratitude.</p>	<p>Appreciation and equity. Public and private acts of appreciation are especially important in accommodator teams to recognize sacrifices and contributions. Beyond this, it is useful to establish norms of equity—that individual members not be allowed to make disproportionate sacrifices and that all members contribute their fair share.</p>
<p>Misreading cues. If team members find it difficult to criticize each other and assert their needs, some issues are driven underground and handled through subtle cues. This can force members to read between the lines. Team members can waste time trying to decipher comments and can take offense at criticism, blame, or demands that were not intended.</p>	<p>Norms of truth-telling (again). Truth-telling norms can help to prevent these problems and enhance communication. When members suspect they are being criticized or blamed, they can also verify the other person's intent before acting on their interpretation: "Why do you say that?" "What did you mean by that?" "Are you saying that . . . ?"</p>