

# Introduction TO CONFLICT Management



IMPROVING PERFORMANCE USING THE TKI

KENNETH W. THOMAS

# INTRODUCTION



If you recently took the *Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument* (TKI), this booklet is for you. It is a next step in understanding your TKI scores and improving your ability to handle conflict effectively.

First, the booklet will help you gain a better grasp of the five conflict-handling modes measured by the TKI, so that you can more easily recognize them. You will learn the primary differences among the five modes and explore common examples of each mode in use.

Then, the booklet will help you use the conflict-handling modes effectively. You will examine the costs and benefits of each mode and get detailed guidelines on when to use and how to skillfully implement each mode.

## What Is the TKI?

The TKI is a self-report questionnaire designed to measure your tendencies in dealing with interpersonal conflict. It describes five different conflict-handling modes and helps you identify which of these modes you use most often. By helping you become more aware of the

choices you and others are making in conflict situations, the TKI and its feedback materials provide a way for you to steer conflict situations in constructive directions.

## Development of the TKI

The TKI was developed by Kenneth W. Thomas and Ralph H. Kilmann in the early 1970s. It is based on theoretical refinements by Kenneth Thomas of a model of managerial conflict styles proposed by Robert Blake and Jane Mouton in the 1960s (Blake & Mouton, 1964).

Thomas and Kilmann originally developed the TKI as a research tool. To reduce response bias, they wrote pairs of statements that were carefully matched for desirability, so that no conflict-handling mode sounded better than others. It soon became apparent, however, that the TKI was also a powerful training tool. People liked the idea that each of the modes was desirable in appropriate situations. This idea allowed them not only to appreciate their strengths but also to learn about the value of modes they were using less often.

## The TKI Today

In the thirty years since the TKI's inception, more than 5 million copies of the instrument have been sold and it has become the leading measure of conflict-handling behavior. It has also been used in hundreds of research studies.

Today the TKI is used in a wide variety of applications, including the following:

- Management and supervisory training
- Negotiation training
- Team building
- Crisis intervention
- Marriage and family counseling

## Using This Booklet

If a trainer or facilitator gave you this booklet, it is likely that he or she also gave you some guidance about what to focus on. If not, here are some general suggestions.

- Read through the sections at the beginning of the booklet to make sure you understand and can recognize the five conflict-handling modes.
- If you are part of a team or work group that took the TKI together, be sure to read the material on collaborating. Collaborating on important issues is a key factor in group effectiveness.

## Things to Keep in Mind

Here are some useful things to keep in mind as you apply the ideas in this booklet.

### Choosing Your Conflict-Handling Modes

- *Remember that you have choices in a conflict.* Be aware that all five conflict-handling modes are available to you. This knowledge gives you a greater sense of control. You can steer conflicts in different directions by choosing different modes.
- *Give yourself time to think.* If you find yourself reacting quickly in a conflict situation, you are

probably operating out of old habits. To choose more wisely, slow down your response time. Pause to consider which mode would be most beneficial in this particular situation.

- *Practice applying the guidelines in this booklet.* You won't be able to remember all of them, but some relevant guidelines will come to mind, such as "There's nothing to be gained from raising this issue, so I'll avoid it." Or, "This is important and we might be able to find a win-win solution, so I'll try collaborating." Keep this booklet so that you can brush up occasionally on the guidelines.

## Developing New Behavioral Skills

### For individuals.

- *Focus on a few new skills at a time.* Pick a few new behaviors that seem most promising, such as saying "and" instead of "but." Concentrate on working them into your behavioral repertoire.
- *Be gentle with yourself.* Skill development goes through predictable cycles, from awkwardness to polish. Don't expect polish right away. Recognize your progress.
- *Continue to add new skills.* As you master new behaviors and they become polished and familiar, you'll have some room to work on adding others. Skim through this booklet occasionally to review your progress and find new skills to try.

### For groups.

- *Appoint a monitor.* If your team is going through this training together, choose someone to monitor the group's progress on conflict management.
- *Set group goals.* Establish shared goals in terms of conflict mode use and new skills that the group wants to implement.
- *Review progress periodically.* Agree on a schedule for when the monitor will report to the group (for example, at the end of each meeting, monthly, or quarterly). Have the monitor review the group's progress toward its conflict management goals. Set new goals as appropriate.

# What Is Conflict?



Conflict is simply *the condition in which people's concerns—the things they care about—appear to be incompatible*. Conflict, then, is something we face every day—a fact of life. Surveys show that managers spend about a quarter of their time handling conflicts. They have to negotiate over resources, handle disagreements over policies, deal with complaints, enforce rules, and manage the inevitable frictions and resentments that occur between people.

Many people make the mistake of equating conflict with fighting—arguing, blaming, name-calling, and so on. This makes conflict seem like a dangerous and destructive thing. However, once you recognize that conflict is simply a condition in which people's concerns appear to be incompatible, it becomes clear that fighting is only one way of dealing with it. This approach allows us to recognize that we have *choices* in how we deal with conflict. It directs our attention to the ways we can control the conflict process through our choices, so that we can manage it constructively. That, of course, is the purpose of the TKI and this booklet.

## Two Basic Dimensions of Conflict Behavior

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Assertiveness and cooperativeness are the most basic dimensions for describing your choices in a conflict situation. They form the two-dimensional space in which we can locate conflict-handling behaviors, as shown in Figure 1. Note that assertiveness and cooperativeness are separate, independent dimensions. They are *not* opposites of each other.

### Assertiveness

Recall that conflict occurs when your concerns appear to be incompatible with someone else's concerns. In that situation, your *assertiveness* is the degree to which you try to satisfy your *own* concerns. This is shown along the vertical axis of the graph in Figure 1. Assertiveness might mean trying to meet your needs or get support for your ideas.

# What Are the Conflict-Handling Modes?

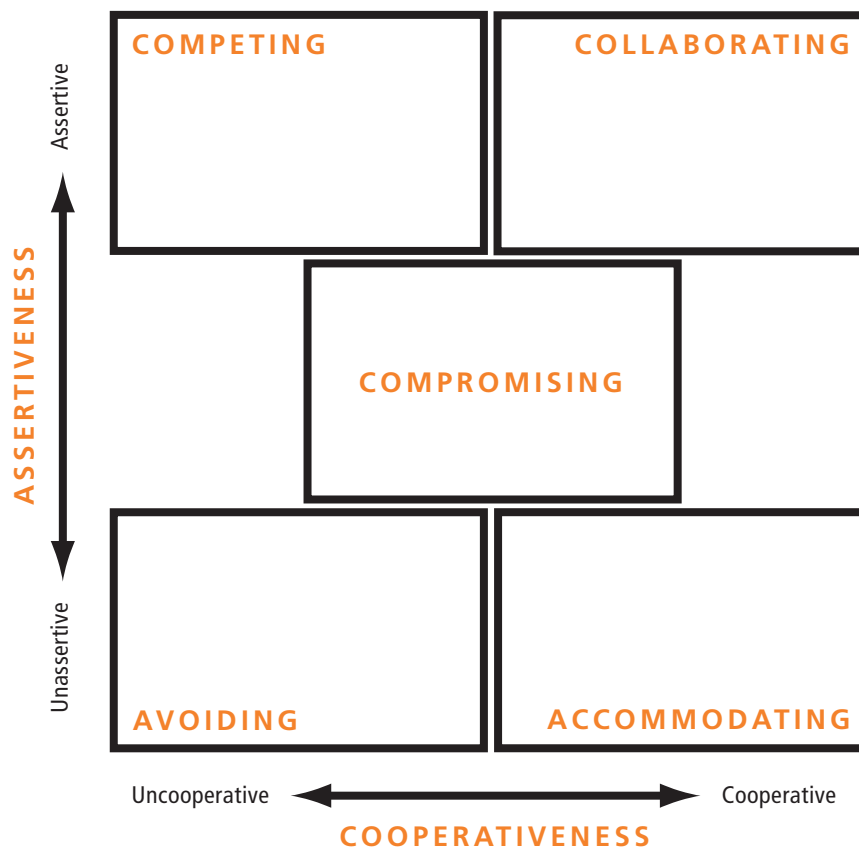


FIGURE 2 • THE FIVE CONFLICT-HANDLING MODES

The conflict-handling modes form the four corners and the center of the two-dimensional space discussed in the preceding section. As shown in Figure 2, they represent the five major combinations of assertiveness and cooperativeness that are possible in a conflict situation.

**Competing** is assertive and uncooperative. You try to satisfy your own concerns at the other person's expense.

**Collaborating** is both assertive and cooperative. You try to find a win-win solution that completely satisfies both people's concerns.

**Compromising** is intermediate in both assertiveness and cooperativeness. You try to find an acceptable settlement that only partially satisfies both people's concerns.

**Avoiding** is both unassertive and uncooperative. You sidestep the conflict without trying to satisfy either person's concerns.

**Accommodating** is unassertive and cooperative. You attempt to satisfy the other person's concerns at the expense of your own.

Note that these conflict-handling modes are general intentions—your *aims* in a conflict situation—rather than specific *behaviors*. You can use a range of behaviors to enact any conflict-handling mode, depending on the circumstances. For example, you can avoid a conflict by sidestepping an issue, staying out of contact with the other person, or suggesting that you postpone the discussion until a better time. Figure 3 illustrates ways in which each mode can get acted out, helping you recognize the prototypical behaviors associated with each.

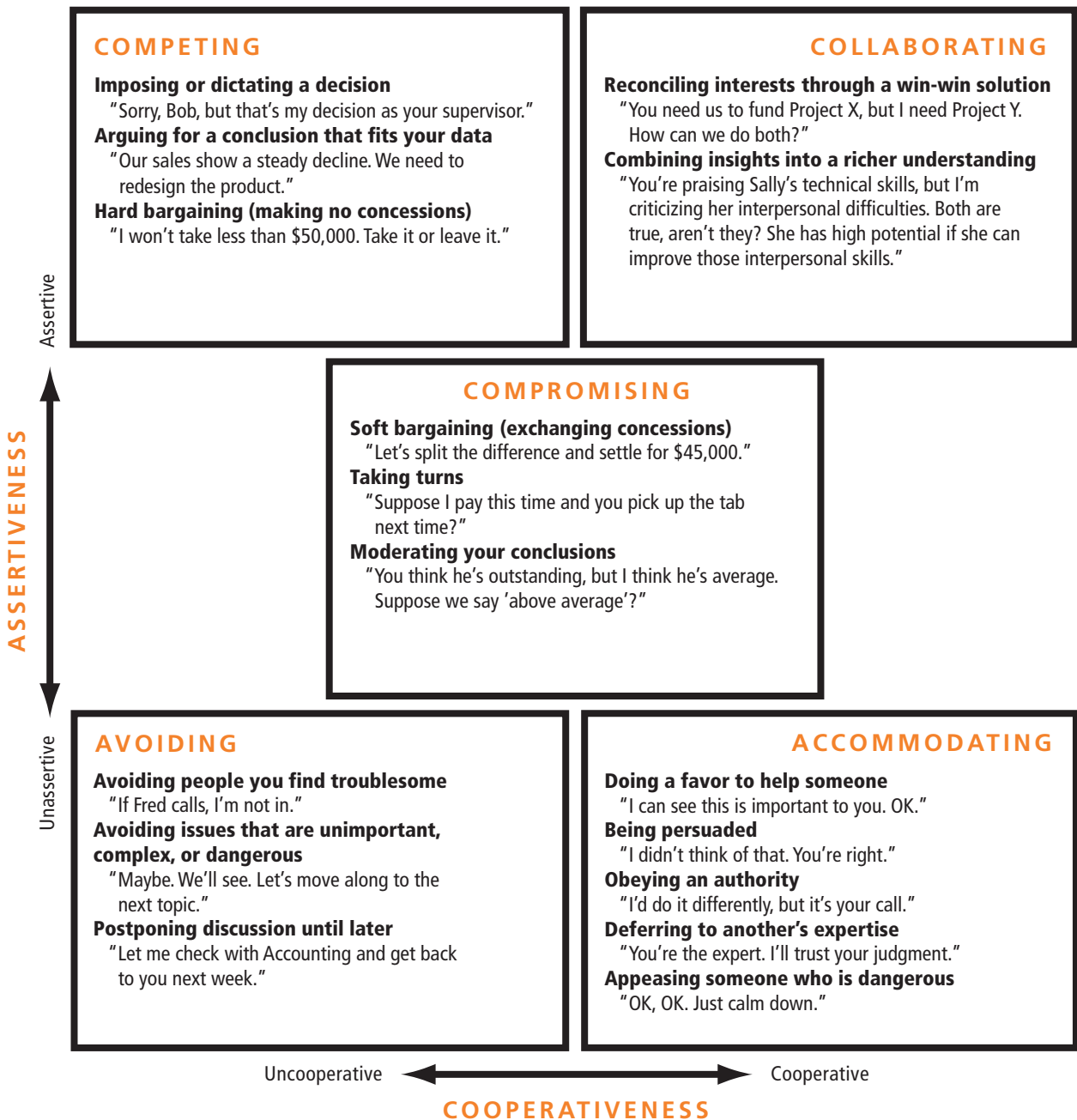


FIGURE 3 • THE CONFLICT-HANDLING MODES IN ACTION

# What Kinds of Tradeoffs Are Involved?



When you choose among the conflict modes, two important dynamics come into play. Briefly, they involve “creating value” and “claiming value” (Lax & Sebenius, 1986). These dynamics involve tradeoffs you must deal with to steer conflict in different directions.

To help us understand these dynamics, we will portray the conflict modes in a somewhat different manner—as ways of dividing up “pies” of satisfaction for the two people involved in a conflict.

## Pies of Satisfaction

In Figure 4, circles, or “pies,” are used to represent each mode in terms of the amount of satisfaction you intend for both yourself and the other person.

### Pieces of the Pie

The size of the *black* area of each pie shown in Figure 4 represents the amount of satisfaction you are seeking for your *own* concerns—that is, how much of the pie you’re after for yourself. Notice that as you move upward in the figure, the more assertive modes show larger black

areas—since you use them to try to satisfy your own concerns more completely.

The *gray* area of each pie represents the amount of satisfaction you intend for the *other* person. Notice that as you move to the right in the figure, the more cooperative modes show larger gray areas—since you use them to try to satisfy the other person’s concerns more fully.

### Sizes of the Pies

The overall size of each pie in Figure 4 represents the amount of joint satisfaction you intend for both people—that is, the total of the satisfaction you intend for your concerns and for the other person’s concerns. Notice that the pies are of three different sizes. Figure 5 shows how the conflict-handling modes relate to the three sizes of pie—labeled lose-lose, win-lose, and win-win.

- With avoiding, the pie is very small or nonexistent. Avoiding is sometimes called *lose-lose* because it pursues no immediate satisfaction for either person. The conflict issue is not addressed, so neither person’s concerns are satisfied.

makes sense only when the potential costs of a bad decision are not very high or when there is plenty of time to recover from it. Support these decisions and keep abreast of how they are working out.

### **Boosting confidence.**

When your own status and self-confidence are relatively secure, you can afford to be self-effacing to boost the confidence of others. For example, you might tell one of your direct reports that you could not have handled a project as well as he did. In introducing that same project at a meeting of your peers, you might give him most of the credit, even though it was your idea in the first place.

### **Accommodate to Clean Up Hard Feelings**

Some important acts of accommodating occur in the aftermath of previous conflicts—to repair strained relationships and allow you to move forward.

#### **To repair damage you have caused.**

The other person may have hard feelings toward you because of something you did—damage you did, competing behavior, or angry comments. Left unresolved, these resentments can damage your relationship with this person, undermining goodwill and trust. If the relationship is important to you, you may need to apologize and make reparations. (See “Satisfying a Complaint,” on page 41.)

#### **To forgive others so you can move on.**

If you feel you were wronged by someone else in a past conflict, you may be holding a grudge—feeling resentment, bitterness, and probably hostility. You may have fantasies about getting even or perhaps forcing the other person to apologize, but you realize that this is unlikely to happen. In this situation, it usually pays to forgive the other person—to let go of your grudge so that you can move on. This doesn’t mean you fully trust the other person. You can still be wary of a repeat offense. But let go of the bitterness that ties up your energy and damages the quality of your life.

## **Behavioral Skills for Accommodating**

- Conceding gracefully
- Planting seeds
- Satisfying a complaint

### **Conceding Gracefully**

There is more at stake than your position. When you find it necessary to concede, do it in a way that preserves credibility and goodwill.

#### **Don’t be a sore loser.**

You may be frustrated about having to concede, but try not to get angry about it. The hallmarks of a sore loser are all too familiar: stomping away in a fit of temper and making dire predictions (“You’ll be sorry!”), demeaning comments (“*Somebody* had to be big enough to give in here”), or complaints of unfairness (“We were cheated!”). Take a higher road that will earn you respect.

#### **Explain your motives.**

Your accommodating could be misinterpreted as a sign that you don’t care about the issue, are yielding to pressure, or weren’t sure of your position. Therefore it is helpful to *briefly* state your reasons for doing so. “I find Harry’s new data convincing.” “Much as I would like us to do this, I can see that I don’t have the votes.” “In the interest of time, I’ll withdraw my motion.”

### **Planting Seeds**

Some of your concerns may require long campaigns to be successfully met. For example, instituting important changes often requires others to learn new ways of thinking, implement a new vocabulary, and let go of old habits. You can usually expect resistance and initial setbacks when you propose such changes, but keep your eye on the longer-term campaign. Even though you may have to concede on some early decisions, you can still lay the groundwork for future success. Use the early episodes to plant new ideas, new information,



and a new vocabulary, which will gradually change the way others look at an issue.

For example, suppose your engineering group prides itself on its problem-solving precision. However, you are concerned that it spends too much time finding precise solutions to problems where a “good enough” solution would do. You start pointing out the difference between “precision” issues and “good enough” issues. At first the group keeps using its old approach, but before long it begins to use your terms and implements a quicker decision process on the “good enough” issues.

### Satisfying a Complaint

Complaints provide feedback that can help improve performance. Handling them effectively can also repair damaged relationships with friends and co-workers—and restore customer loyalty. Still, handling complaints is often challenging and sensitive.

#### **Accept anger (but not abuse).**

Complaints are often accompanied by anger. View the anger as part of the other’s frustration, not as a personal attack. (See “Use your psychological boundaries,” on page 36.) Convey the attitude that it is all right for the other person to be angry. While abuse—including screaming, name-calling, physical threats, and hostile physical contact—is not acceptable, expressing heated words is okay. For example, saying, “Your people knocked down our fence! How could they do that? Don’t you train them?” is simply an expression of anger.

When you accept other people’s anger, you let them “get it off their chest.” As they express that anger (without your being defensive or counterattacking), they gradually discharge it. You will notice a change in their tone and posture: you will hear less intensity, and they will begin to relax. Until that happens, it will be difficult for them to hear what you say. After it happens, you can discuss things more reasonably. Often, people will even be apologetic about their angry behavior of a few minutes ago.

#### **Explain (but don’t defend) what happened.**

The people who are complaining often don’t understand how the offending action could have

occurred. Assuming the action was deliberate, careless, or even stupid will intensify their anger and damage your reputation with them. Provide information about any mitigating circumstances that can help explain what happened: “We have been having problems with our computers.” “The person who normally handles your account has been on sick leave.” “The driver was trying to avoid hitting a dog.” Be careful not to defend what happened or try to talk the other person out of his or her complaint. If the person suffered a loss, he or she has a right to complain.

#### **Use active listening.**

There are times when it is not clear what the other person wants—especially when the person is a child or someone who is upset. When it’s not clear what the person wants, use active listening skills to make sure you understand the position he or she is taking. “So you would like us to repair your fence. Is that right?”

#### **Apologize.**

People who complain usually want an apology and assurance that whatever happened won’t happen again. A timely apology can go a long way toward smoothing a conflict situation. When you apologize, you are acknowledging the damage done, taking responsibility for your part in it, and expressing regret. The implicit message is that you are not the kind of person (or organization) that does that kind of thing, you regret that it happened, and you won’t let it happen again. You are hoping for forgiveness and a restoration of trust.

#### **Make reparations when appropriate.**

When the other person’s interests have suffered, you may need to go beyond an apology. You may offer a gift as a symbolic repayment or provide more complete compensation. For example, hotel personnel may adjust a bill to make up for a malfunctioning shower. And you should offer to repair the fence your driver knocked down.

**SUMMARY: WHEN AND HOW TO ACCOMMODATE*****DECIDING WHEN TO ACCOMMODATE*****Don't fall into a pattern of appeasement****Yield to a better position**

- When you are persuaded
- When others know more and there's little time

**Concede when you are overruled or losing**

- When you are overruled by your boss
- When you are outvoted in a group
- When you are outmatched and losing

**Make a small sacrifice when it's important to others**

- Doing favors
- Letting people test their wings
- Boosting confidence

**Accommodate to clean up hard feelings**

- To repair damage you have caused
- To forgive others so you can move on

***BEHAVIORAL SKILLS FOR ACCOMMODATING*****Conceding gracefully**

- Don't be a sore loser
- Explain your motives

**Planting seeds****Satisfying a complaint**

- Accept anger (but not abuse)
- Explain (but don't defend) what happened
- Use active listening
- Apologize
- Make reparations when appropriate