Psychology of **Conflict** in the Workplace

How you can use psychological and personality insights to better manage conflict

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Fight, flight, and conflict

When you think of conflict, what comes to mind?

For most people, it's verbal disagreements, physical fighting, and sometimes even wars.

That's because our minds are wired for survival, and thanks to that we usually get a rush of adrenaline when we're in a situation where there may be a conflict, whether we need it or not.

Think of a time when you were interacting with someone difficult. The more your conversation went back and forth, you probably started to feel frustrated, anxious, or angry. Without knowing it, your breathing probably started to increase, as did your pulse. But once it was over, and you walked away, it was easy to think about that situation more clearly and think about what you should have said in the heat of the moment. That's thanks to our body's fight or flight response.

That stress response, the fight or flight response, doesn't realize that you're just disagreeing with someone in an office setting. It thinks you're getting ready to physically fight with someone or something, or maybe run from a wild animal. Your normal systems for logical thought are put on pause as your body goes into survival mode.

The good news is that you can learn to manage conflict better. And while you can't eliminate the adrenaline response altogether, you can reduce how often you react (or overreact) to conflict.

This is also good news for managers, leaders, and HR practitioners, because in the workplace conflict causes turnover and absenteeism. It can even cause projects to fail.

You can't change someone else's behavior. BUT you can increase your own self-awareness, and other people can increase their own awareness with the right training and skillset.

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Defining conflict

Many people equate the word "conflict" with fighting, blaming, or arguing. While these are all ways that you might address a conflict, it's not the definition of conflict.

Instead, conflict is defined as the **"condition in which people's concerns—the things they care about—appear to be incompatible."**

In other words, it's a situation where your opinions, ideas, or perspectives differ from others. It can be a disagreement over issues like budgets, timelines, schedules, or change implementation.

At the end of the day, the way you handle a conflict or disagreement can be seen as a choice.

You can choose to totally avoid conflict. In other words, push it off or ignore it. You can choose to be full-on assertive—to win at any cost. You can also choose a more cooperative stance. That cooperative stance might be giving in to the other person, meeting the person halfway or (the sometimes more difficult path) figuring out how to most fully address both your needs and theirs.

All these choices are useful, but each have a time and a place.

Usually, people aren't aware that they have a choice when it comes to conflict. Most people have a preferred way of approaching conflict but are unaware of their approach or the consequences it might be having on others.

Choosing the right conflict management mode can result in well-managed conflict that's more likely to promote positive employee engagement, increased productivity, innovation, and high morale.

On the other hand, poorly managed conflict is more likely to create distrust, work delays, decreased information sharing, and poor working relationships.

And while conflict can occur in all parts of our lives, we'll focus primarily on workplace conflict.

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3 types of conflict in the workplace

When it comes to conflict in the workplace, there are usually **three types of conflict**. Each one comes from our definition above: they relate to people's concerns being incompatible.

However, there are differences in how these conflicts arise, their severity, and the best ways to resolve them.

The three types of workplace conflict are task conflict, relationship conflict, and value conflict.

Task conflict

Task conflict centers around issues of work assignments.
It can include differences of opinion on:

- Dividing up resources.
- Procedures and policies.
- Expectations of employees.
- Judgments and interpretation of facts.
- And more.

Between task conflict, relationship conflict, and value conflict, task conflict (on the surface) looks like the easiest to deal with. Often with task conflict, employees can either manage it between themselves or defer the decision to someone in a higher management position.

As you'll learn later in this e-book, there are five conflict-handling modes. Any of the modes can be used to deal with task conflict, but there are big benefits to understanding which mode might work best under certain circumstances.

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Relationship conflict

Relationship conflict arises from differences in personality preferences, style, matters of taste, and even default conflict handling modes.

What often makes relationship conflict more difficult than task conflict is that without self-awareness or proper training, it's easy for people to jump to conclusions about the other person they're in conflict with.

It becomes personal.

Take a look at two examples below. The first uses **Myers-Briggs® personality type** to explore a conflict situation. The second uses the **FIRO® assessment** to show the role of interpersonal needs in conflict.

Personality type preferences

According to the Myers-Briggs framework, people have personality preferences in the following four pairs. Having one letter from each pair makes up your four-letter MBTI type:

- Preferences for Extraversion (E) or Introversion (I)
- Preferences for Sensing (S) or Intuition (I)
- Preferences or Thinking (T) or Feeling (F)
- Preferences for Judging (J) or Perceiving (P)

For this example, we're going to look at the last two letters or preferences: Judging or Perceiving. These preferences show how a person approaches the outside world.

Those who prefer Judging like to have their world organized and planned.

They like to come to conclusions quickly, close out the topic and move on. They're often thought of as the list-makers and planners of the world. When it comes to working on big projects, they'll usually break it down into smaller pieces with spaced out deadlines before the final deadline.

Western cultures—particularly in education and business—tend to favor and reward this type of behavior.

Those who prefer Perceiving like their plans to be flexible and open to adaptation.

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They prefer to take in information as it comes in, and delay decisions until they have as much data as they possibly can before concluding. When it comes to big projects, they'll often work on the project in bursts, and while they're just as apt to meet the final deadline as those who prefer Judging, you likely won't find them giving themselves internal deadlines.

Unfortunately, Western cultures often negatively stereotype people with these personality preferences as procrastinators. In reality, there are just as many benefits to this way of working as the Judging way of working.

Now imagine two colleagues working together on a project. One has a personality preference for Judging and the other has a personality preference for Perceiving.

You can probably guess how this plays out. Maybe you've even seen evidence of these patterns in your own workplace.

The person who prefers Judging often wants to break up the project with smaller deadlines and work from a plan. The person who prefers Perceiving doesn't think it makes sense to plan just yet—you've only just started the project and don't have all the information yet!

Further, if one person's task relies on the other person's completion of a task, things get even more difficult.

Interpersonal needs

The FIRO® tool was originally created to help naval warship teams work together more effectively in high stress environments. It's often used for team building, communication, leadership development and more.

According to the FIRO Business® assessment, all of us have three main interpersonal needs: Involvement, Influence, and Connection.

Each of these three interpersonal needs has two sides: the wanted need and the expressed need.

If we look at the interpersonal need for Influence (sometimes called Control), it describes a person's behavior in terms of responsibility, power, and decision making. Basically, it's how much someone wants to influence or direct the behavior of others or be perceived as being in charge.

If someone has a high interpersonal need for Wanted Influence, that means they would like for someone else to exert authority or control—they don't necessarily want to be the ones to do it.

A high interpersonal need for Expressed Influence means that someone wants to be the person in charge, making decisions, and having power and responsibility.

Everyone has different interpersonal needs. But most people aren't aware of what their needs are.

Imagine a manager with a high need for Expressed Influence and an employee who reports to them with a high need for Wanted Influence. These two people would probably work very well together, because one person is giving what the other person wants.

Now, consider if both people had a high interpersonal need for Expressed Influence. You'd probably end up with a lot of conflict regardless of what tasks people are working on.

Both the manager and their report would want to exert control and be the one to make decisions. And while the manager has the hierarchical authority to do so, it would most likely lead to an unhappy, disengaged employee. The employee would feel micromanaged, and the manager wouldn't understand what the problem was.

In both the FIRO and MBTI framework examples, relationship conflict can be minimized with an understanding of personality differences.

Value conflict

Value conflict arises from fundamental differences in identities and values. This could include differences in politics, religion, ethics, norms, and more.

While political and religious discussions are not usually encouraged in organizations, value conflict can come up around work decisions or policy decisions, such as how much a company outwardly supports social issues or how to address diversity and equity initiatives.

MIT professor Lawrence Susskind says that value conflicts "tend to heighten defensiveness, distrust, and alienation. Parties can feel so strongly about standing by their values that they reject trades that would satisfy other interests they might have."

He recommends that parties in a value conflict try to move toward mutual understanding and respect in dialogue instead of seeking to resolve it.

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"This type of understanding doesn't require sympathy or emotional connection, only a 'values-neutral' ability to describe accurately what someone else believes about the situation," write Robert Mnookin, Scott R. Peppet, and Andrew S. Tulumello in Beyond Winning: Negotiating to Create Value in Deals and Disputes (Harvard University Press, 2004).

You can also try to reframe a value conflict "by appealing to other values that you and your counterpart share," writes Susskind. "Including universal beliefs such as equal rights or nonviolence, rather than focusing on the differences in beliefs that precipitated the dispute will often minimize the conflict."

Perception and biases

When you see someone doing something you don't like (such as cutting in front of you in traffic), you might be tempted to say that they're rude or a bad driver, or give some other explanation that's negative. However, if you do the same thing, you probably tend to give a more neutral or positive explanation—such as being late for work so you had to cut in front of the traffic.

This is an example of one of the many types of **cognitive biases**. Specifically, this example is called the fundamental attribution error. **The fundamental attribution error identifies our tendency to overemphasize internal factors for other people's behavior while attributing external factors for our own.**

We all have biases. No one is without them. And they alter our perceptions.

However, a little knowledge of psychology and a dose of self-awareness can bring unconscious biases like these into the light.

When you're dealing with conflict, you have to go beyond labels, assumptions and perceptions and look at it in a different way. And asking questions is one of the best ways to let people explain their motivations and behaviors.

"Until we recognize that we're each a difficult person for someone else, we're never going to be able to adjust our behavior, " says Jay Johnson, ATD Master Trainer.

Remember that when dealing with conflict between you and someone else, it's important to separate the person from the behavior.

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Managing conflict

What if instead of thinking about conflict as a negative, stress-inducing experience, you consider it a necessary step toward innovation?

Some conflict is just difference. And with more diversity than ever on teams and in organizations, differences of opinion, values, and more are bound to cause more conflict.

However, the upsides to diversity and inclusion outweigh the risk of conflict. **Research shows** that decisions made and executed by diverse teams delivered 60% better results. In addition, teams that follow an inclusive process make decisions two times faster with half the meetings needed.

Other benefits to effective conflict management include:

- Improved communication.
- Increased team efficiency.
- Reduced costs associated with time lost to conflict.
- Increased employee engagement and retention.

Let's look briefly at employee engagement and retention. Every year, organizations spend billions of dollars to keep their employees engaged—and for good reason. When employees are engaged, challenged, and meeting their growth goals, they're more committed to the organization's success and less likely to resign.

In addition, high turnover rates result in lower productivity, overworked staff, and loss of institutional knowledge.

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Plus, there's the high cost of recruiting, interviewing, and training. Some estimates are as high as 150% of the employee's annual salary to replace them. That number increases to up to 300% replacement cost at the highest management levels.

High amounts of conflict in organizations can lead to turnover. On average, it costs **150%** of an employee's salary to replace them.

The latest **research from Gallup** shows that engaged employees result in an 81% difference in absenteeism and a 14% difference in productivity. Organizations whose employees are more engaged are on average 23% more profitable than organizations whose employees are not engaged.

How else can conflict management lead to better organizational outcomes?

"When you go into a group meeting with somebody who is very different from you, the assumption that there's going to be a conflict actually leads to better outcomes because you prepare better," says researcher and professor **Cindy Wang** of Kellog School of Management at Northwestern.

"For example, in one study, Katherine Phillips and I gave people tasks and said, 'Hey, you're going to be working with a stranger from the opposite political persuasion.' We then saw that knowing this leads you to start preparing a little bit more for the discussion, because you assume that there is going to be conflict. This drives better decisions in the end, because you're more prepared and more introspective. On the other hand, if we come from the same group, we don't challenge each other as much."

Five conflict-handling modes

Understanding the five different conflict-handling modes can help you improve communication, which paves the way for everyone to find solutions, achieve business goals, reduce stress, and more.

These five conflict-handling modes are measured by the **Thomas Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument** (TKI®). The TKI tool is the world's most popular conflict management assessment, and has been used by leaders, HR practitioners, and

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consultants for over 40 years to help individuals and teams communicate better, make more effective decisions, and work together better.

The first step in learning to use each of the conflict-handling modes is self-awareness. You need to be aware that certain modes are being used too much or too little. Each mode has a best place and situation in which to be used.

The second step is practice. You need to be able to practice using each of the conflict-handling modes so that you're comfortable with them instead of simply defaulting to your normal behaviors.

Each of the five modes has different levels of assertiveness (getting your needs met) and cooperativeness (getting the other person's needs met).

Here are the five conflict-handling modes:

1. **Competing**
   When using the competing mode, your behaviors are assertive and uncooperative. You're looking to satisfy your own concerns or to win a position, potentially at the other person's expense. Competing is the opposite of accommodating.

2. **Avoiding**
   When using the avoiding mode, your behaviors are unassertive and uncooperative. You're not looking to pursue yours or the other person's concerns and you're not addressing the conflict. Avoiding is the opposite of collaborating.

3. **Collaborating**
   When using the collaborative mode, you're both assertive and cooperative, and you're looking to find a solution that satisfies the concerns of both you and the other party. Collaborating is the opposite of avoiding.

4. **Accommodating**
   When using the accommodating mode, you're unassertive and cooperative. You're neglecting your own concerns in favor of satisfying those of another person. Accommodating is the opposite of competing.

5. **Compromising**
   When using the compromising mode, you're moderately assertive and cooperative. You're looking to find an expedient, mutually acceptable solution that will address some of your concerns (but not all) and some of the other party's concerns (but not all).

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After reading these modes, is there one that you think always works best? Do some of the modes feel uncomfortable for you? Based on your personality, workplace, upbringing, cultural experiences and more, some of the conflict-handling modes will come more easily to you than others.

All modes are useful. But which mode is the most useful for you depends on the situation.

Let's take avoiding, for example. Many people feel that avoiding conflict will only lead to negative consequences. However, if the conflict is trivial and it would take more of your time to manage the conflict than it's worth, avoiding could be the best conflict-handling mode to use.

Competing is another conflict-handling mode that often gets a bad reputation. When using the competing mode, you're being assertive but not being cooperative. This mode might come in handy during an emergency, when you don't have time to talk through the various actions in response and a decision needs to be made quickly.

While the optimum approach should be dictated by the situation, leaders can benefit from being aware of common problems that come along with each of these modes.

For example, people who underuse the collaboration mode often view teammates as obstacles. This could be because they're defaulting to competing, and therefore only seeking to win.

But it could also be because they're defaulting to avoiding or accommodating, and opting to consistently neglect their own interests. In either case, this can lead to sour relationships and disengagement.

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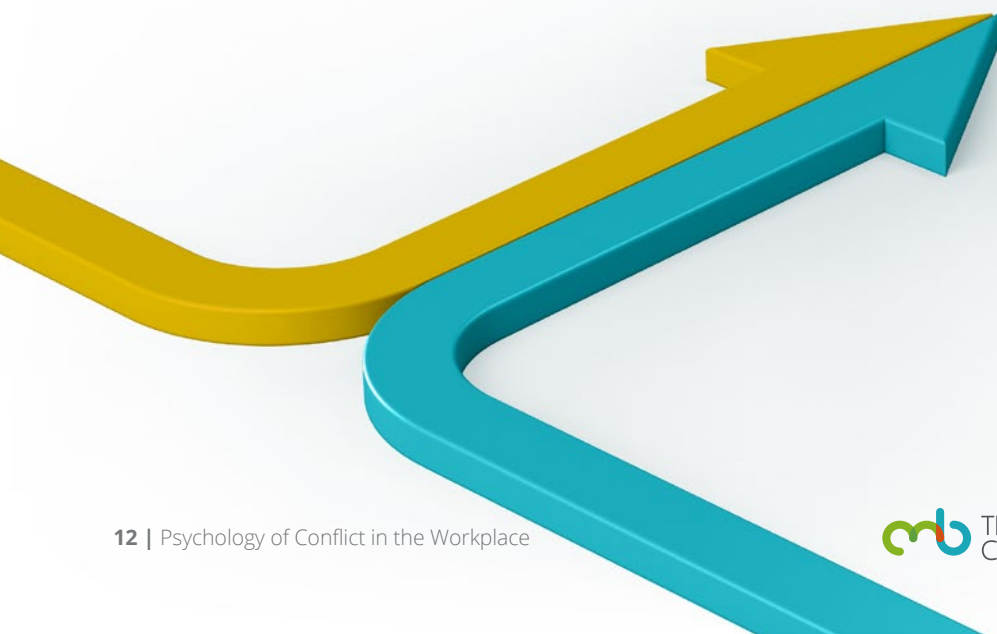
Even by just understanding what each of the five conflict-handling modes are, and actively trying to observe which mode you use most often and which modes others use, you're increasing your self-awareness when it comes to conflict management.

If you'd like to learn more about which conflict-handling modes you use most often and least often, learn more about the TKI® assessment and how to take it **here**.

Change management and conflict

Conflict often arises when dealing with change. Change and conflict are a package deal because in times of change, people's perspectives on how the change should be implemented or the results of the change often differ.

In addition, perception of change is different at every level. The CEO may view the change in terms of the bottom line, whereas managers see it in terms of processes and outcomes. Individual contributors may look at the exact same change and only see how it now makes their tasks more difficult, or they may be concerned about workload or job security. Add to that the different ways people handle conflict and it's no wonder their first reaction to change is generally resistance.

"When I was doing a change management project in Barcelona, at the time I was there the culture was very conflict averse, because in that country's history prior to 1974 if you spoke up or disagreed with those in government power, you'd be put in jail. And that was in the culture of this organization—people had learned not to speak up," said **Ralph Kilmann**, co-author of the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI).

"I gave them all the TKI assessment and lo and behold, they came out very high on avoiding and accommodating. Throughout the organization. So, for two years, we had exercises and activities to work through different ways of handling conflict. We talked about what the unwritten rules were. Then we moved to what norms would help the people succeed. These people were hired for their expertise, and knowledge, and you have to share your ideas. What can we do to help everyone feel supported when they speak to better resolve complex issues?"

"Once we were done, you couldn't stop them from talking. I used to joke that it was so quiet when I first got here, now everyone is sharing their ideas and opinions."

But learning to better manage conflict means that the next time a big change comes around, you'll be better prepared. Less stressed.

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Want to learn more about change management? Download Psychology of Change in the Hybrid Workplace **here**.

Hybrid work and conflict

Hybrid work has changed the landscape of how and where you get your work done. But the changes associated with hybrid work have also had an effect on how we deal with conflict in the workplace.

Differences in opinion and preference can often result in conflict. Within the hybrid workplace, let's think solely about meetings: new standards are being set around how often to meet, whether the meetings can be in person or online or a combination depending on who's in the office, whether the meeting is more effective in-person, should cameras always be turned on, and more.
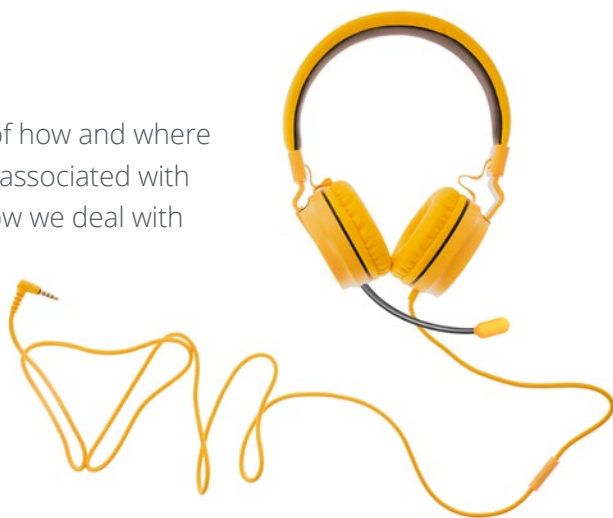
Take the example of turning on cameras during a hybrid meeting. People have different opinions around their comfort-level with being on camera, the perceived necessity of being on camera, and (depending on who is in the meeting) even the authority that people have to request others to turn on their cameras.

In addition to the conflict above, without good conflict management skills, discussions such as these often lead to assumptions about team members.

In one team, if the majority of the group prefers Extraversion, or has a high interpersonal need for inclusion, they may prefer to have their cameras on. But the person in the minority with different views, preferences and needs may not feel the need to turn their camera on.

What assumptions might the rest of the team make about the person with their camera off?

Perhaps that they're not a team player. Or that they're not working as hard as the rest of the team because they're not showing themselves working. Or that they're hiding something.

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Now imagine the same team, but some of the people are in the office and some are working remotely. Without understanding each other's preferences or typical conflict-handling behaviors, what assumptions could be wrongly made about each team member's behaviors when the team is trying to make an important decision?

Dr. Gail Fann Thomas, conflict management expert and co-author of the new TKI® Team Report shares another example of hybrid work norms, preferences, and conflict below.

"As an instructor or coach, I want you to have your camera on, I want to see you, and I want to be able to read the nonverbal cues you give when speaking about conflict. It's not as good as face-to-face, but better than not seeing the other person at all," says Dr. Fann Thomas.

"But when I was working with people in classified spaces, they didn't even have cameras on their computers. They weren't allowed to have cameras on their computers. I also noticed that in different commands (in my work for the US Navy), there would almost be a culture in which the members just didn't want to have cameras on in their personal home space. So even within different organizations depending on the culture, they come up with norms in which they would say, 'we don't do cameras on here.' But those norms and decisions affect how much information people receive from each other when communicating to solve a conflict."

Teams and conflict

Conflict management skills are especially important when dealing with teams. While one individual will have their preferred conflict-handling mode, the same can be said when you put a group of people together. Just like team strengths and weaknesses, that team's preferred conflict-handling mode is the combination of all team members' conflict-handling preferences.

"When I do conflict management workshops with teams, what's fascinating and empowering is we're building a common language. It means we can actually talk about conflicts, because we know what those different approaches are, we know what happens when there's overuse or underuse. And that common language makes conflict management objective, and it's less likely that people will take it personally or as an insult or a put-down," says Dr. Fann Thomas.

"During the workshop using the TKI results, everyone knows where their Achilles heels are on certain things and with each other."

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In addition to using conflict management tools with existing teams, it also comes in handy when working with newly formed teams. When a team has a new manager, or people enter or leave an existing team, those team dynamics inevitably change. Having everyone on the team understand each other better at the newly formed team's infancy sets the stage for higher performance. It means there's less time spent learning through process and error.

Conflict management workshops and tools can also help teams work better in situations where the whole team is remote, or in hybrid environments that mix in-person and remote team members.

Think about a team where most people in the group prefer to use the avoiding conflict-handling mode. While a team may get by in a face-to-face work environment, that whole situation changes when the team is working remotely. There's no opportunity for reading body language or (depending on whether people are using their cameras during meetings) even facial expressions. These unspoken visual cues are incredibly important to personal interactions. Without them, conflict management takes more time.

"Another place that's important to recognize conflict management norms is within the fluidity of teams," says Dr. Fann Thomas. "10 or 20 years ago it was assumed that teams were more stable. You stayed on a particular team, and you did it for a long time with the same people. But that's changed significantly over the years. Which also means different generations in the workforce have different experiences with teams and their fluidity."

"The research shows this change in teams over time, and I can tell it's true from my personal experience in my university, where I was probably on 12 teams simultaneously. Some of them were short term, some of them were long term, some of them were more homogeneous, like my management group. Or I'd be

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on committees that would be cross disciplinary so I'd be working with engineers or people from national security affairs, so there'd be a broad difference in team members, but those committees would only be for three or four months. And then I had multiple research teams that were all going simultaneously and each of those had different members, some of them overlapping, but some not."

"The research shows that people are moving in and out of teams at a much more rapid rate than they did in the past."

"The implications for that, the way I read it is, you really need to have these conflict management skills, whether you're a member of a team or a leader of a team. A lot of changes are going to create more conflict and you still have things that are going to be due, and you still have quality concerns, and so dealing with conflict, it seems to me it's going to be one of the very most important things for the future of work."

Conclusion

Remember that while conflict is inevitable—and part of the human condition—how you choose to deal with conflict is a choice. And while everyone has a default conflict-handling mode, anyone can increase their self-awareness around their behaviors and learn the skills to better manage conflict.

To wrap things up, here a few things to keep in mind as you consider your organization's approach to conflict:

- Well-managed conflict can be positive. In fact, cultivating a certain amount of task-oriented conflict may be desirable, as it may surface people's ideas and increase engagement by helping people feel that their voice is heard.
- Train people to be aware of how they tend to naturally approach most conflicts.
- Teach them to observe how others on their team tend to approach conflict.
- Help them understand the options for handling conflict, and make conscious, deliberate decisions regarding the best approach.

"Remember that conflict is inevitably part of the human condition—it's how we handle it that's important," says Dr. Fann Thomas. "People and organizations that learn to handle it well using deliberate, structured approaches will ultimately be more successful."

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About The Myers-Briggs Company

In our fast-changing world, your edge lies in harnessing 100 percent of your talent—at work, at home, and everywhere in between.

The Myers-Briggs Company helps organizations worldwide improve teams, develop inspirational leaders, and solve the most perplexing people challenges. We empower individuals to be the best versions of themselves by enriching their understanding of themselves and others.

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Ready to help yourself or your teams better manage conflict? **Contact us today.**

More conflict management resources:

Listen to Dr. Gail Fann Thomas talk about conflict management in her episode on **The Myers-Briggs Company Podcast**.

Learn more about the **TKI conflict management tool.**

Interested in using the **TKI tool with teams?** Contact us.