

Navigating Hard Conversations with Managers, Peers, and Direct Reports

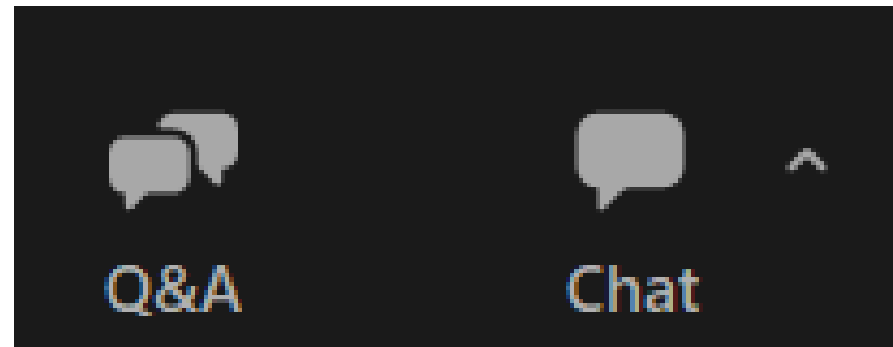
Presented by Gail Fann Thomas, EdD

August 20, 2024



Before We Get Started

- Webinar is being recorded
- Slides will be sent out, along with resources
- Submit questions at any time using the Q&A
- Feel free to use the chat to share what you're thinking throughout the webinar



Gail Fann Thomas, EdD

A portrait of Gail Fann Thomas, a woman with shoulder-length brown hair, smiling. She is wearing a blue and white patterned top and large hoop earrings. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

Educator, author, consultant, executive coach

Taught graduate management and executive education at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, CA for more than 30 years

Specializes in communication, building collaborative capacity, conflict management, and team development

Currently working with private sector organizations and several federal agencies

Published more than 60 academic articles, chapters and technical reports; co-author TKI Team Report

Lives in Monterey, CA

Poll

What's your experience helping others navigate hard conversations at work? Choose all that apply.

- A.** I am a consultant who helps individuals or teams navigate hard conversations.
- B.** I am a manager, CEO, or HR director who approves or manages programs about hard conversations for my organization.
- C.** I am a team leader or individual who wants to learn more about navigating hard conversations.
- D.** Other (please specify in chat box)



Agenda

The Basics: Hard Conversations and Their Relationship to Conflict

- Definitions of hard conversations and conflict
- Goal of hard conversations
- Triggers
- Threats that make conversations hard

Process Model for Hard Conversations

- Self awareness, perceptions of others, and situational factors
- Cognitive frame and emotional responses
- Conflict-handling preferences
- Behavior and reaction to others

Tools and Skills to Help Employees Better Navigate Hard Conversations

- Assessment tools that contribute to effective hard conversations
- Skills that enable productive hard conversations

Applying the Model to a Real-World Scenario

- Scenario
- Applying the model: background, sensemaking, approach, behavior



The research is clear

**Complex problems require
different viewpoints**



But different viewpoints often call for hard conversations



Definition of Hard Conversations

Uneasy discussions between organizational members who care about an issue, have different perspectives, and may experience strong emotions.

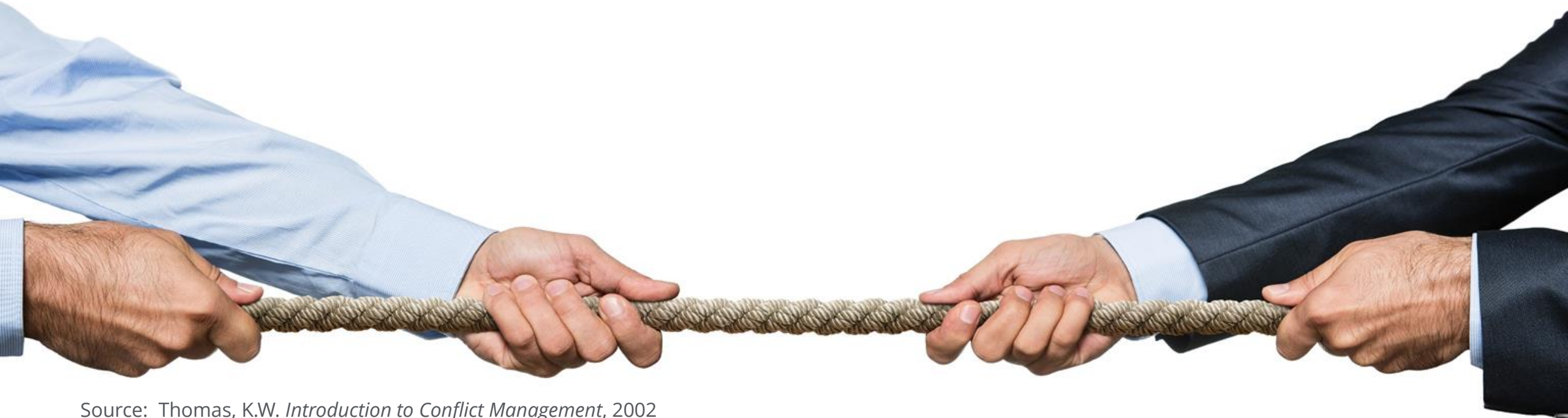
Hard conversations can occur with direct reports, co-workers, managers, or external constituents.



Definition of Conflict

Conflict occurs when people's concerns, or the things they care about, appear to be incompatible.

Conflict can be either destructive or constructive – depending on how it is handled.



The goal of a hard conversation is to be able to:

- share different perspectives
- build mutual understanding
- manage one's emotions
- foster respect and
- cultivate positive relationships





What might trigger hard conversations between managers and their direct reports?

- Please enter your response in the chat box.
- Example: project deadlines

What might trigger hard conversations among co-workers?

- Please list your response in the chat box.
- Example: team member not doing their share of work



What might trigger hard conversations with external constituents?



- Please list your response in the chat box.
- Example: delayed delivery of a product or service



Which conversations are the most difficult? (POLL)

- A. Direct reports and their managers (upward)
- B. Managers and their direct reports (downward)
- C. Co-workers
- D. Individuals outside the organization (e.g. vendors, partners)

What makes these conversations so hard? (What's the threat or fear?)



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Tools and Skills to Improve Your Ability to Navigate Hard Conversations

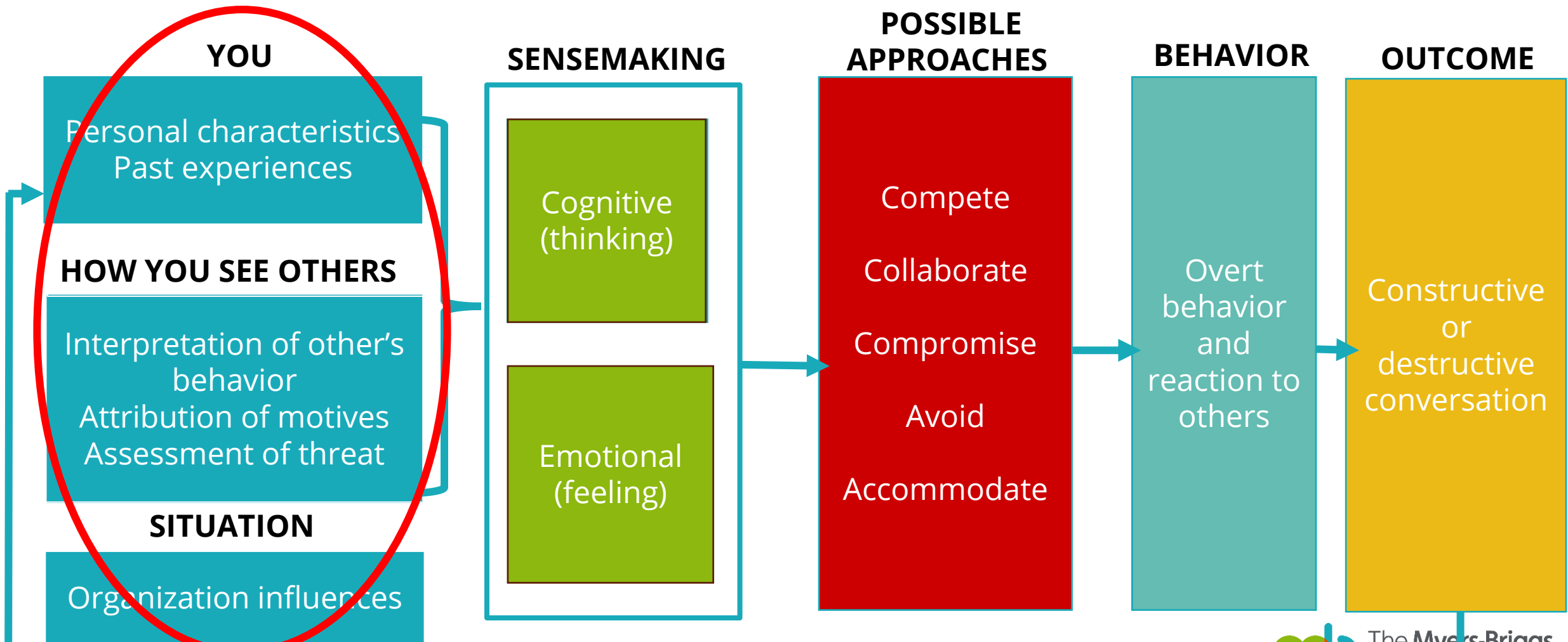
- Assessment tools that contribute to effective hard conversations
- Skills that enable productive hard conversations

Applying the Model

- Scenario
- Applying the model: background, sensemaking, approach, behavior

The Process Model

What happens when engaging in a hard conversation?



Source: Adapted from Robbins, S.P. *Essentials of Organizational Behavior* (1994)

Self awareness

- What makes a conversation “hard” for the person?
- How tolerant are they with discord? (intensity)
- What is their past experience with hard conversations?
- What triggers hard conversations for them? (values and unmet needs)

You and how you see others



View of the other

You and how
you see others

- How does one's perception of the other contribute to the hard conversation?
- What threats cause the most anxiety? (e.g. fear of retribution, reputation)



Situational factors that contribute to hard conversations in the workplace

- How much trust exists in the organization?
- Does the organization value collaboration?
- Are members encouraged and trained to share their needs and concerns?
- Do members experience psychological safety in their team, department, or organization?



Psychological safety

Definition

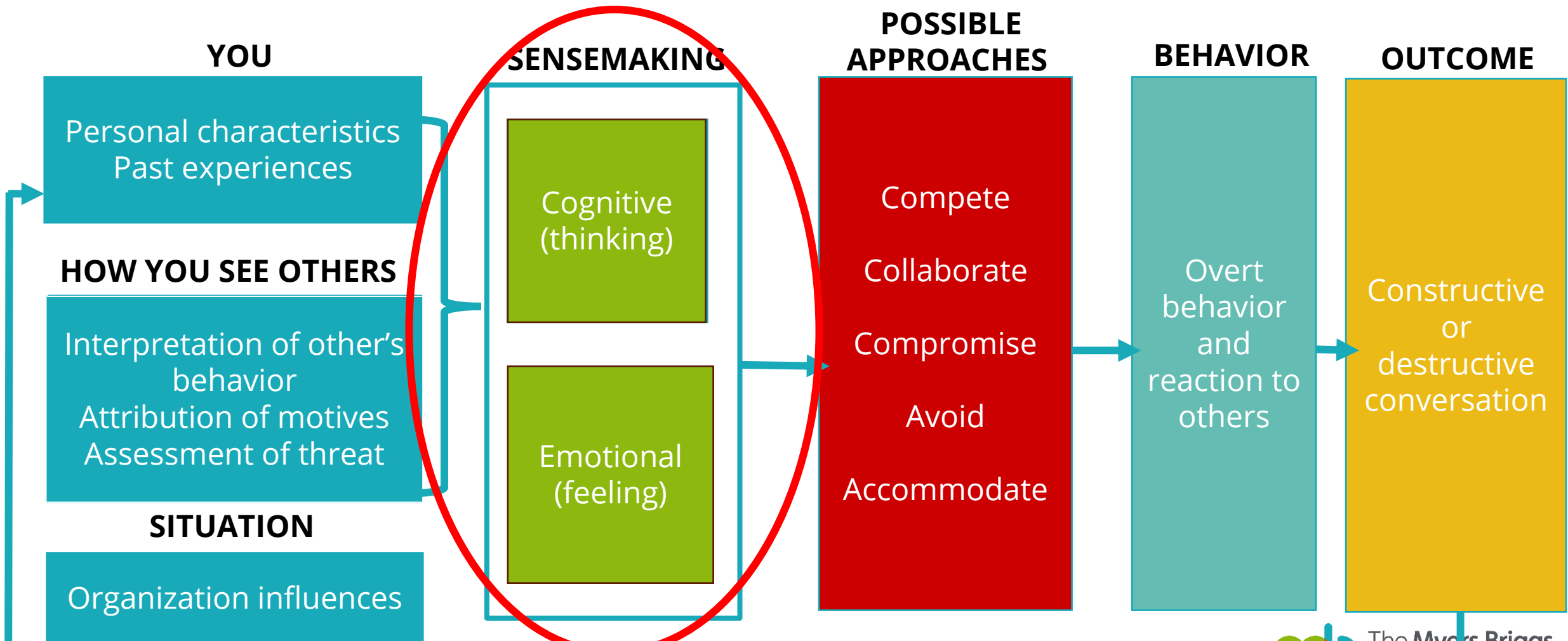
The belief that one will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns, or mistakes. It is safe for interpersonal risk taking.

Components

- Individual safety (I feel safe offering a new idea)
- Respect (People are accepted for being different)
- Learning (People can talk about mistakes and ways to improve)

The Process Model

What happens when engaging in a hard conversation?



Source: Adapted from Robbins, S.P. *Essentials of Organizational Behavior* (1994)

Making sense of hard conversations – Cognitive aspects

- Can the person separate facts, interpretation of the facts, and evaluation of the situation?
- What frames are being used to interpret the situation?
- Are they able to invent alternative interpretations of the same situation?



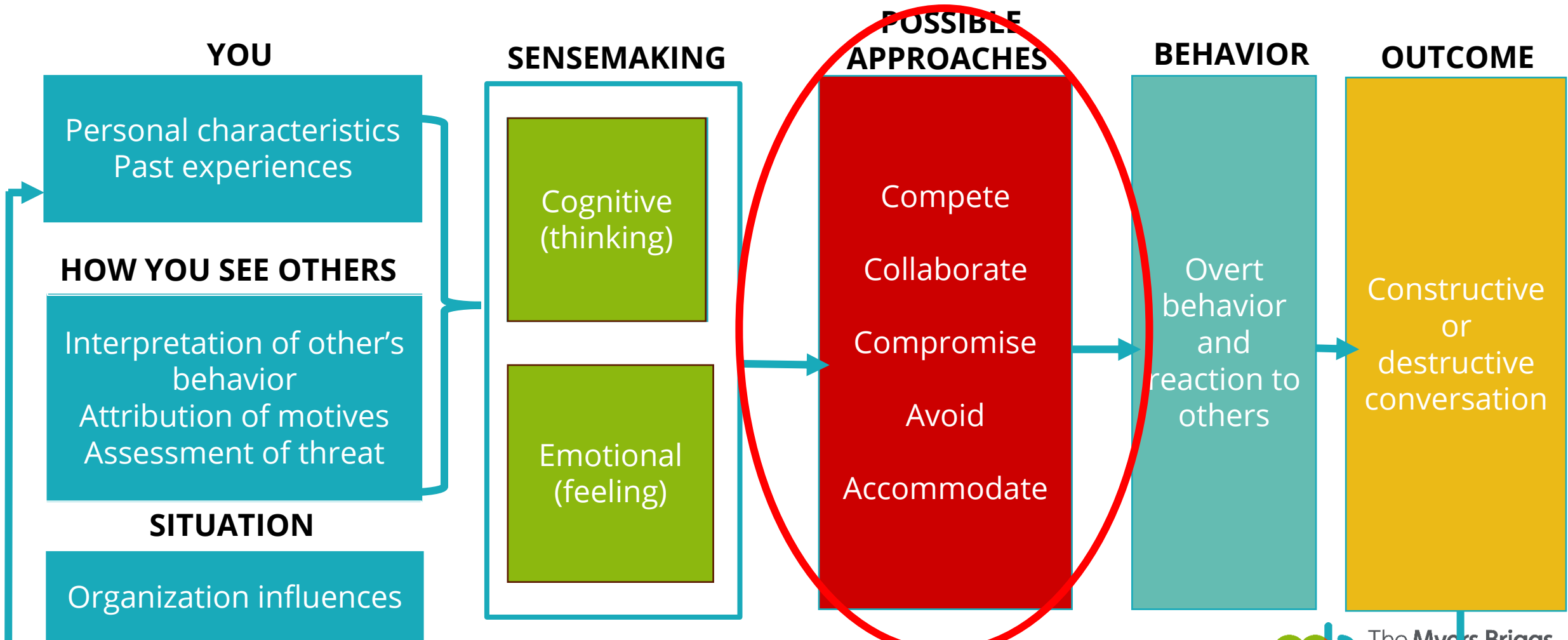
Making sense of hard conversations – Emotional aspects

- Can the person articulate the emotions associated with a hard conversation?
- Do they know what unmet needs might be at play and the relationship to their emotions?



The Process Model

What happens when engaging in a hard conversation?

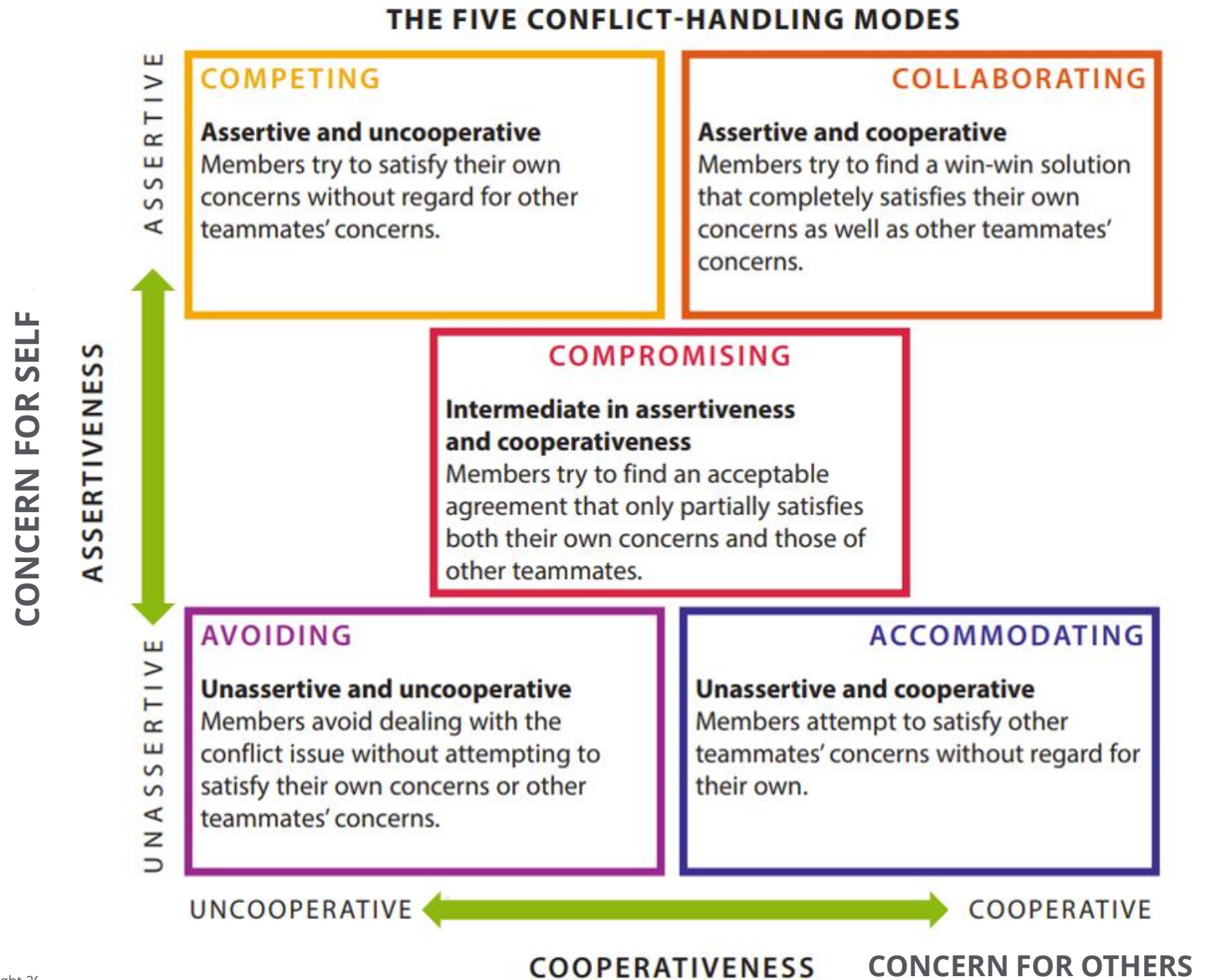


Source: Adapted from Robbins, S.P. *Essentials of Organizational Behavior* (1994)

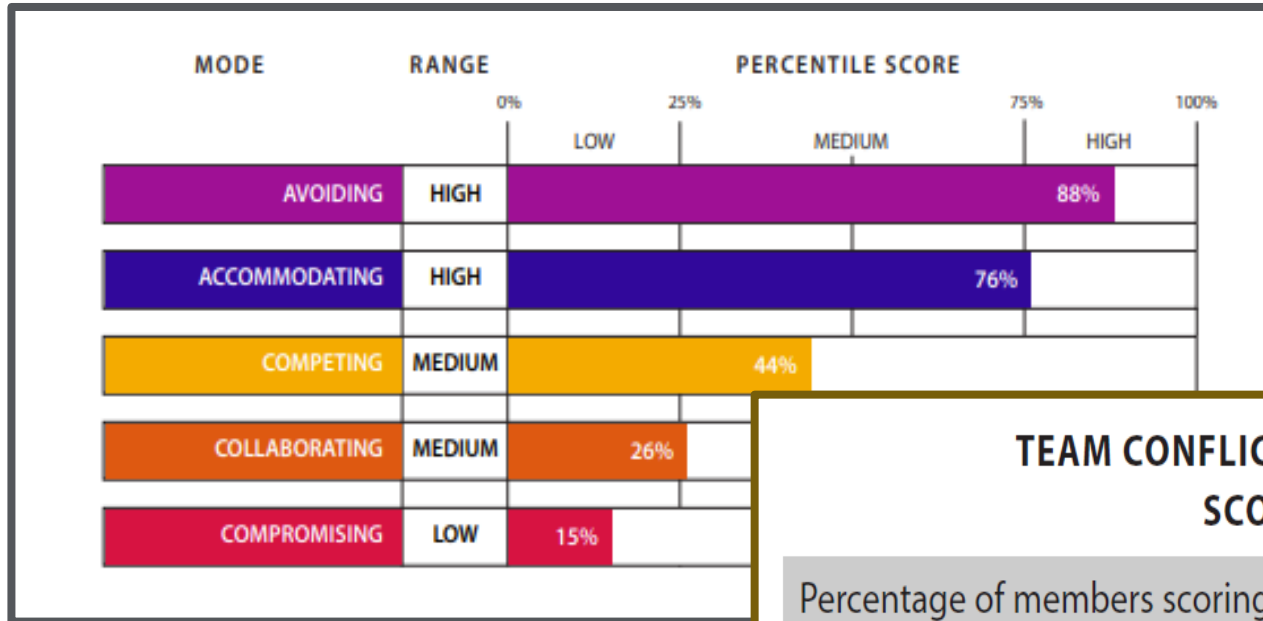
What approaches are used to handle conflict?

Individuals generally have (often unconscious) patterns of responses when they are faced with hard conversations or conflicting viewpoints.

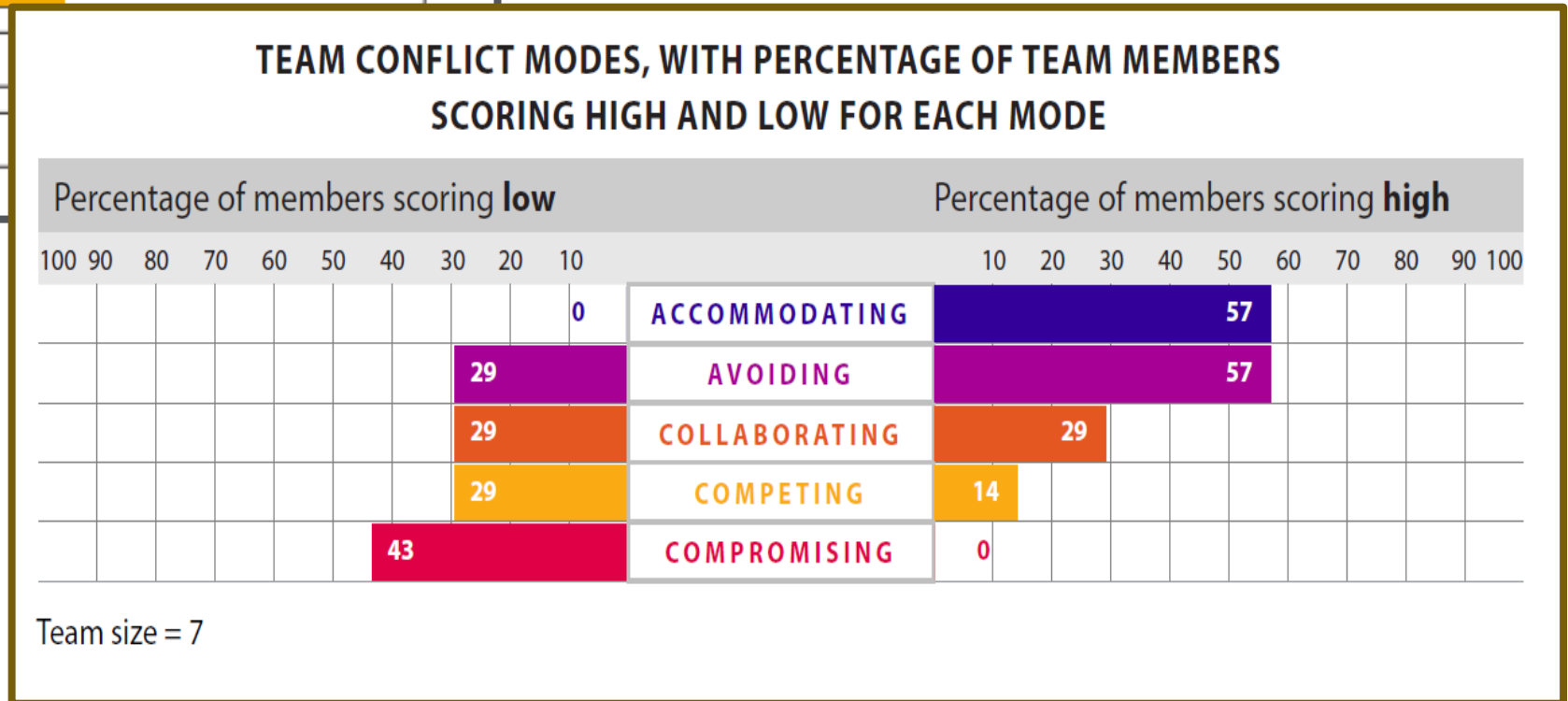
When faced with a hard conversation, individuals often avoid or accommodate.



The TKI assesses individual and team conflict-handling approaches



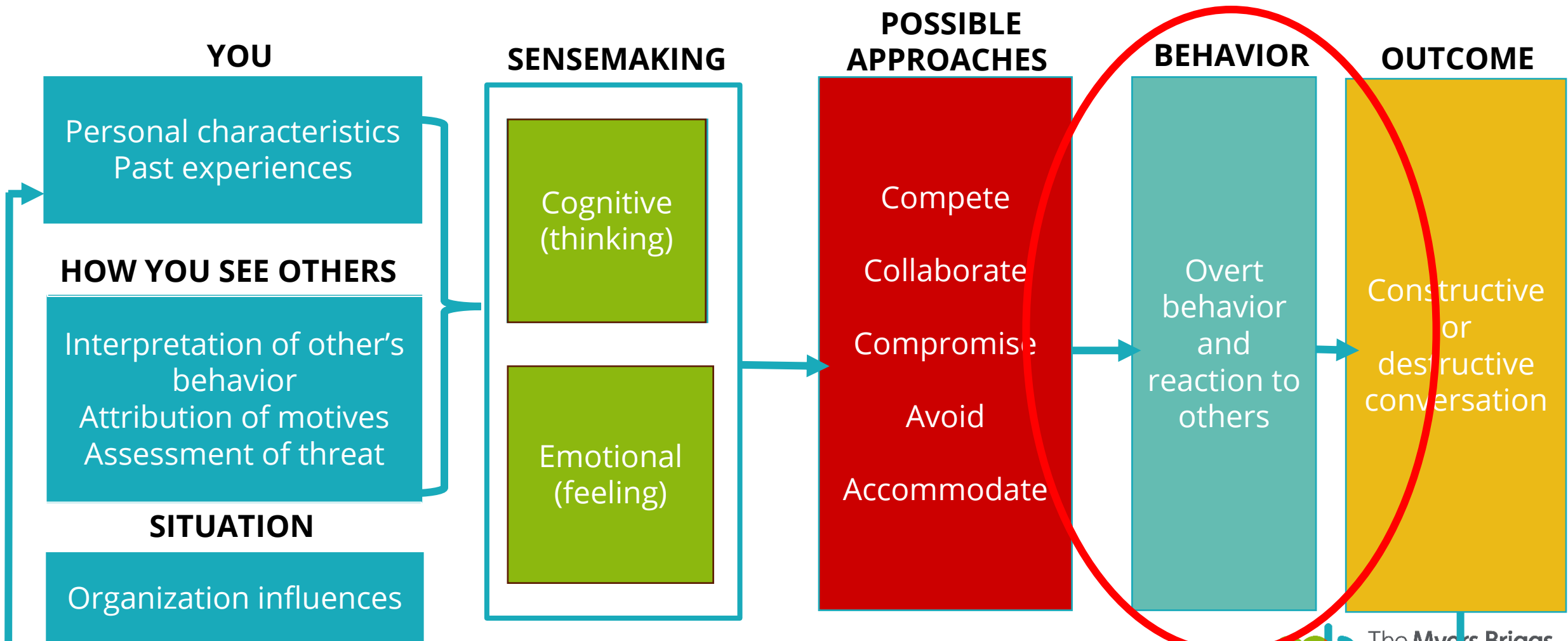
← Individual profile



Team profile →

The Process Model

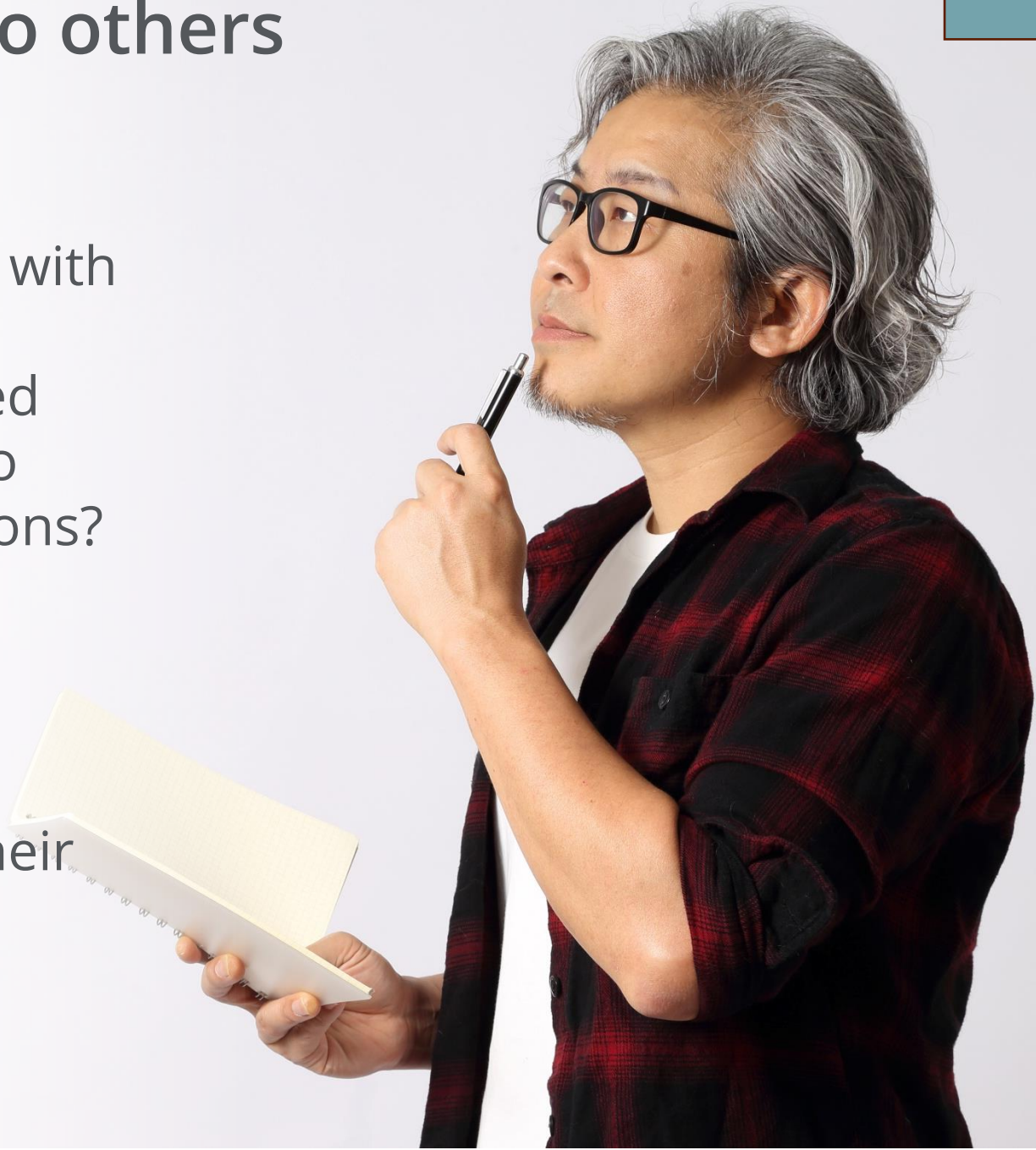
What happens when engaging in a hard conversation?



Source: Adapted from Robbins, S.P. *Essentials of Organizational Behavior* (1994)

Behavior and reaction to others

1. Does the person know their behavior patterns when faced with hard conversations?
2. Have they tracked and analyzed their behavior and reactions to others during hard conversations?
 - a. Individual journaling
 - b. Feedback from others
 - c. Third-party observations
 - d. Role plays/simulations
3. Does their behavior match their intentions?



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Tools and Skills to Improve Your Ability to Navigate Hard Conversations

- Assessment tools that contribute to effective hard conversations
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Applying the Model

- Scenario
- Applying the model: background, sensemaking, approach, behavior

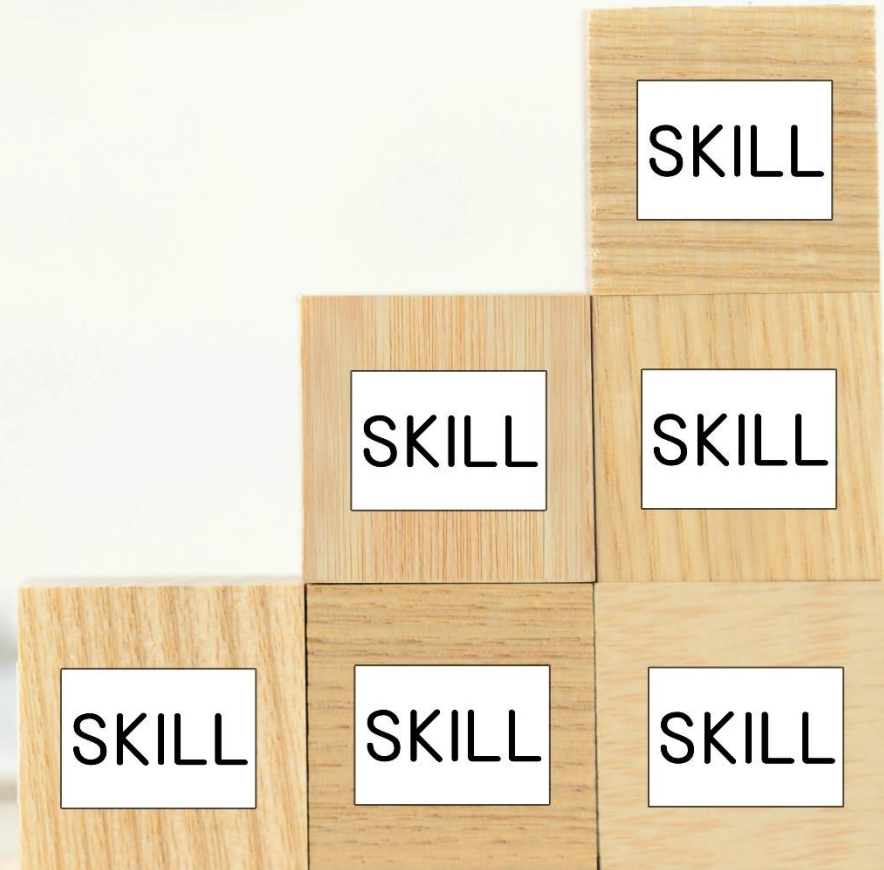
Some assessment tools relevant to hard conversations

Assessment	Relevance
Myers-Briggs Type Indicator® (MBTI®) and MBTI Communication Style Report	Self awareness Communication style
Psychological safety inventory (Edmondson, 2019)	Situational aspect
Emotional intelligence assessments	Emotions and interpersonal relationships
FIRO-B®	Interpersonal relationships
Communication styles inventory (Goulston, 2015)	Communication style during conflict

Identify individual differences and learn to use the differences to engage in constructive (vs destructive) conversations

Skills that Enable Constructive Hard Conversations

- Set or reestablish behavior standards
- Apply effective problem solving
- Identify concerns for all parties
- Engage in perspective-taking
- Use active listening
- Employ empathy
- Decrease defensiveness (e.g. use “I” statements)



Using “I” Statements

- “You” statements tend to increase defensiveness
 - “You always interrupt me which makes me angry.”
- “I” statements show how the situation looks from your perspective, can help reduce blame, and open the door for more constructive conversation.
 - “At our last department meeting, I was interrupted several times which made me very frustrated, then angry. When I’m interrupted, I feel disrespected and feel like my ideas aren’t valued. Next time we meet, can we set some ground rules to make sure that people don’t talk over one another?”

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Example Scenario

A professional meeting taking place around a long wooden conference table. A man in a green shirt is leaning over the table, pointing at a document. Other participants, including a man in a white shirt and a woman in a green top, are seated around the table, some looking at the document. A man in a tan suit is standing on the right side of the table, holding a document. The background features large windows with vertical blinds and indoor plants.

Scenario

Background information

- Geraldo is a new manager of a five-person team. He is known for his ability to meet deadlines and produce high-quality work, yet he knows he needs to develop his interpersonal skills.
- Geraldo has never been comfortable dealing with direct reports in tense conversations and almost always avoids or accommodates, even when it might create a negative outcome. He's aware that he avoids hard conversations with his direct reports because he fears they will think he's a bad manager if he is too confrontational.
- Data from a recent manager-wide assessment reveals that many managers in the organization avoid hard conversations. This avoiding behavior might be having a negative effect on the company.

Scenario

The incident

- Geraldo has been manager of his team for about 3 months now. Things seem to have been going well until a recent production problem threatened to derail the team.
- About that same time a new member was assigned to Geraldo's team and things further unraveled. The new member Hillary is very outspoken and seems to have an opinion about everything. As result of Hillary's assertiveness, other members of the team have shut down and rarely speak up at meetings.
- Geraldo is hesitant to say anything to Hillary for fear that things might get worse. He hopes that things will get better if he just stands back for a bit.
- His manager has called for a meeting early next week and wants to know if Geraldo has a plan to turn things around. Geraldo is very stressed and wonders what he should do about Hillary to get the team back on track.

Scenario

What we later learn about Hillary

- The day before Geraldo plans to meet with his boss, Geraldo runs into his colleague, Herman. Hillary worked for Herman before coming to Geraldo's team.
- Geraldo shares his concern about Hillary and her impact on the team.
- To his surprise, Geraldo learns that Hillary is considered to be a star performer. Herman explains that Hillary has very high standards and can be off-putting, but that she can probably help Geraldo turn the performance problem around.
- This new information makes Geraldo pause and rethink his approach to Hillary, to his boss, and to the team.

Applying the Model

- **Personal Characteristics and Past Experience:**

- What do we know about Geraldo?

- How comfortable is he with hard conversations?
- What is his general response in these types of situations? (compete, avoid, compromise, accommodate, collaborate?)
- What seems to be his fear of having this conversation?

- **Initial View of Hillary:**

- At the start, how do you think Geraldo views his new team member, Hillary?

- **Organizational Influences:**

- Does the organization appear to support effective hard conversations?

Sensemaking

- How is Geraldo making sense of this situation?
 - Cognitive
 - What has he observed about Hillary's behavior?
 - What interpretation is he making about her behavior and the situation?
 - What's the initial conclusion he drew?
 - How does he appear to be framing Hillary's impact on the team?
 - What alternative frames might he use? In other words, what reasons might be behind Hillary's behavior?
 - Emotional
 - What emotions is he feeling? With respect to Hillary? The team? His boss?
 - Why might these emotions be surfacing for Geraldo?

Approach

- Given Geraldo's past history in these types of situations, what is Geraldo's likely approach here? What is the likely outcome of this approach?
- What might be an effective approach to engage in constructive conversations that would lead to productive outcomes?
 - With Hillary which approach might be best to use? (poll)
 - A Competing?
 - B Collaborating?
 - C Compromising?
 - D Avoiding?
 - E Accommodating?

Behavior

- For a collaborative approach with Hillary:
 - What skills might be important for Geraldo?
 - Clarify team behavior standards
 - Apply effective problem solving
 - Identify concerns for all parties
 - Perspective-taking
 - Use active listening
 - Employ empathy
 - Decrease defensiveness (e.g. use “I” statements)
 - How might he address the issue with Hillary?
 - Should this be a group or individual conversation?
 - What might be his strategy for creating a constructive conversation with Hillary?



Questions?

Insights?



Suggested Reading

Edmondson, A.C. (2018). *The Fearless Organization: Creating Psychological Safety*. Wiley.

Edmondson, A.C. & Smith, D.M. (2006). Too hot to handle? How to manage relationship conflict. *California Management Review*, Fall, 6-31.

Eisenhardt, K., Kahwajy, J.L., and Bourgeois L.J. III (1997). How management teams can have a good fight. *Harvard Business Review*.

Goulston, M. (2015). Assessment: How well do you communicate during conflict? *Harvard Business Review*.

Peterson, R. (2023). Understanding the ladder of inference. USC Gould School of Law.

Rosenberg, M. (2015). *Nonviolent Communication: Tools for Healthy Relationships*

Thomas, K.W. (2002). Introduction to conflict management: Improving performance using the TKI. The Myers-Briggs Company.

Podcast, Webinars, Team Conflict Assessment

Podcast:

[Conflict management podcast with Dr. Gail Fann Thomas | The Myers-Briggs Company \(themyersbriggs.com\)](#)

Webinars for individual and team conflict:

[Developing Teams Using the TKI Team Report | The Myers-Briggs Company \(themyersbriggs.com\)](#)

[Managing Conflict for Three Types of Teams | The Myers-Briggs Company \(themyersbriggs.com\)](#)

[Navigating Change in the Public Sector: How to Leverage Conflict for Success \(themyersbriggs.com\)](#)

TKI conflict assessment:

Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument Individual Interpretive Report.

<https://www.themyersbriggs.com/tki>

Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument Team Report and Facilitator's Guide.

<https://www.themyersbriggs.com/en-US/Connect-with-us/Blog/2022/October/The-New-TKI-Team-Report>

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