

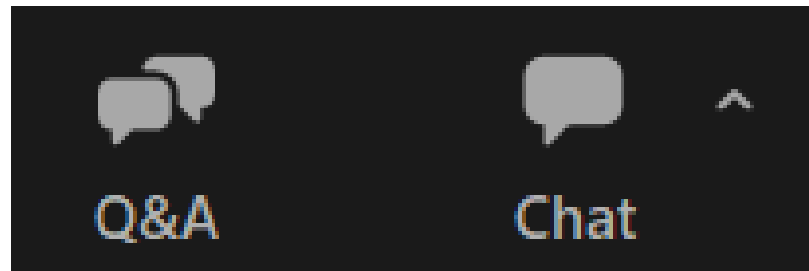
Polarization in the Workplace: Navigating Opposing Viewpoints Constructively

Presented by Gail Fann Thomas, EdD

April 24, 2025

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



Poll

What's your experience helping others navigate polarization at work?

- A. I train, coach, facilitate, or consult with individuals or teams about managing polarization at work.
- B. I am a manager, CEO, or HR director who approves or manages programs about addressing polarization at work.
- C. We don't address polarization in the workplace.
- D. Other (please specify in chat box)



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

Mediator for Restorative Justice Program

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

Lives in Monterey, CA

Agenda

Polarization in the Workplace

- Definition of Polarization
- From Disagreement to Polarization
- Extent of the Problem
- Causes of Polarization
- Costs and Benefits

A Framework for Thinking about Polarization

- Polarization and Conflict Management
- Five Approaches to Handling Conflict
- Win-Lose Framing
- Competing and Its Undesirable Risks

Strategies for Addressing Polarization

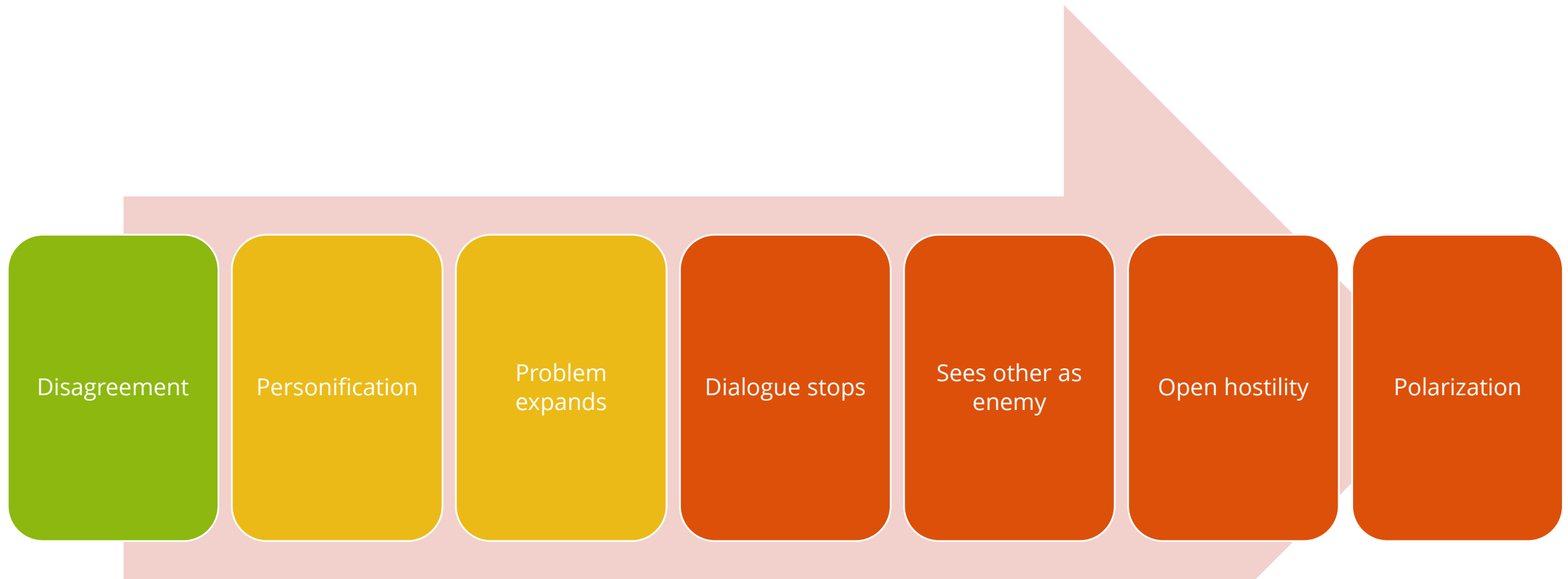
- Seven Exercises That Address Polarization
- What Leaders Can Do to Manage Polarization

Definition of Polarization in the Workplace

- A division of two sharply contrasting groups or sets of opinions, beliefs, or interests
- Can take many forms—from political polarization to clashing opinions on hot-button, companywide issues (e.g., return-to-office mandates) to intense disagreement over decisions in team projects



How Disagreements Can Escalate to Polarization



Source: Danish Center for Conflict Resolution

Extent of the Problem

A global study about conflict management showed:

- **Prevalence:** On average employees spend 4.34 hours per week dealing with conflict at work.
- **Leadership Responsibility:** 98% of respondents said that conflict handling is a leadership or management skill that is extremely or very important.
- **Financial Cost:** Workplace conflict is estimated to cost UK employers £28.5 billion per year.



Why Polarization Happens in the Workplace

- Societal polarization is increasingly seeping into the workplace.
- Information bubbles or echo chambers reinforce extreme positions.
- Employees tend to associate with others who have their same views (in-group bias).
- Negative stereotypes are attributed to the opposing group; opposing groups are demonized (out-group bias).
- Individuals seek out information that confirms their existing beliefs and reinforces their polarized views (confirmation bias).
- Employees feel their views are not valued; can become defensive and entrenched in their positions; trust is eroded.
- Team and organization leaders fail to provide clear guidelines for civil conversations.

But Also Consider This...

- Individuals often experience a “perception gap” where they tend to overestimate negative beliefs and attitudes of the opposing group. This creates a sense of a greater division than exists.
- When opposing viewpoints are openly explored, individuals find they actually have more in common than they previously believed.
- Most employees desire a positive and respectful workplace.
- A majority of workers want a stable and productive work environment.



Potential Costs and Benefits of Managing Polarization in the Workplace

Cost of Not Managing Polarization

- Erodes trust
- Decreases morale
- Problems not addressed
- Inhibits effective communication
- Valuable views not shared

Benefits of Managing Polarization

- Improves employee satisfaction and retention
- Creates a workplace culture that addresses opposing views constructively
- Increases employees' ability to management conflict
- Raises trust
- Enhances productivity

Agenda

Polarization in the Workplace

- Definition of Polarization
- From Disagreement to Polarization
- Extent of the Problem
- Causes of Polarization
- Costs and Benefits

A Framework for Thinking about Polarization

- Polarization and Conflict Management
- Five Approaches to Handling Conflict
- Win-Lose Framing
- Competing and Its Undesirable Risks

Strategies for Addressing Polarization

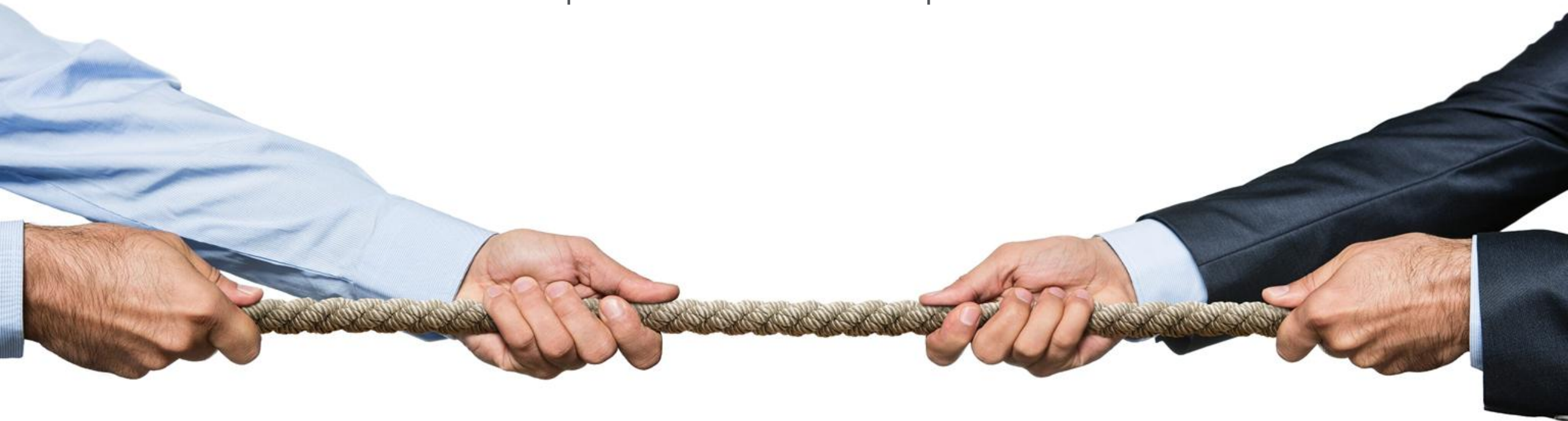
- Seven Exercises That Address Polarization
- What Leaders Can Do to Manage Polarization

Conflict Can Be Constructive or Destructive

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

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

Destructive conflict can lead to polarization in the workplace.



Source: Thomas, K.W. *Introduction to Conflict Management*, 2002



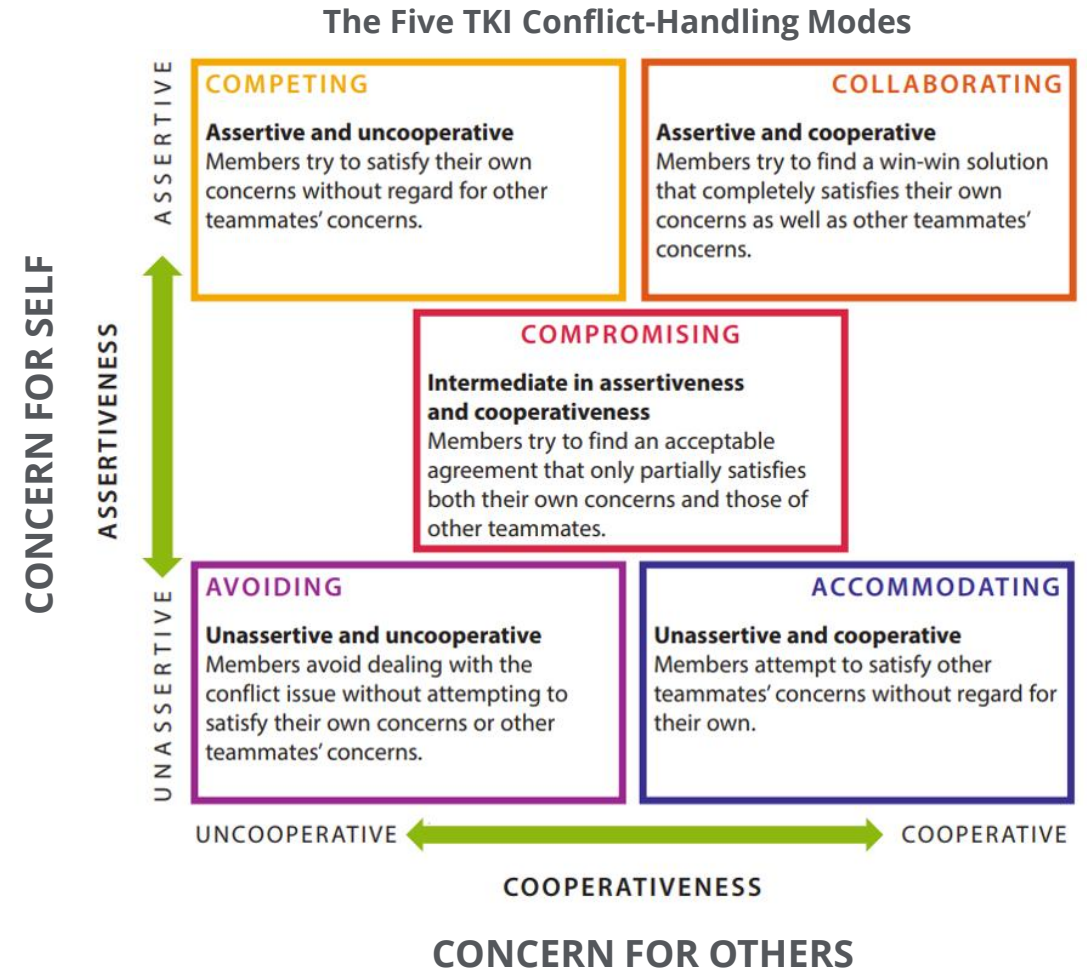
Importance of Conflict Management Skills for Employees

- Only 39% of employees are trained or coached to handle conflict.
 - 96% of those said the training/coaching helped them deal with conflict more effectively.
 - 73% said they felt more confident and comfortable engaging in disagreements.
 - 62% were able to turn potential destructive conflict into constructive conflict.

Source: Minson, J.A. and Gino, F. Managing a Polarized Workforce, 2022, HBR

Individuals have conflict-handling preferences that are often unconscious and ineffective.

- Research shows that UK cultural views on conflict are influenced by a desire for politeness and the avoidance of direct confrontation to maintain social harmony.
- Can result in indirect communication and a tendency to avoid "rocking the boat."
- Can lead to misunderstandings or unresolved issues.



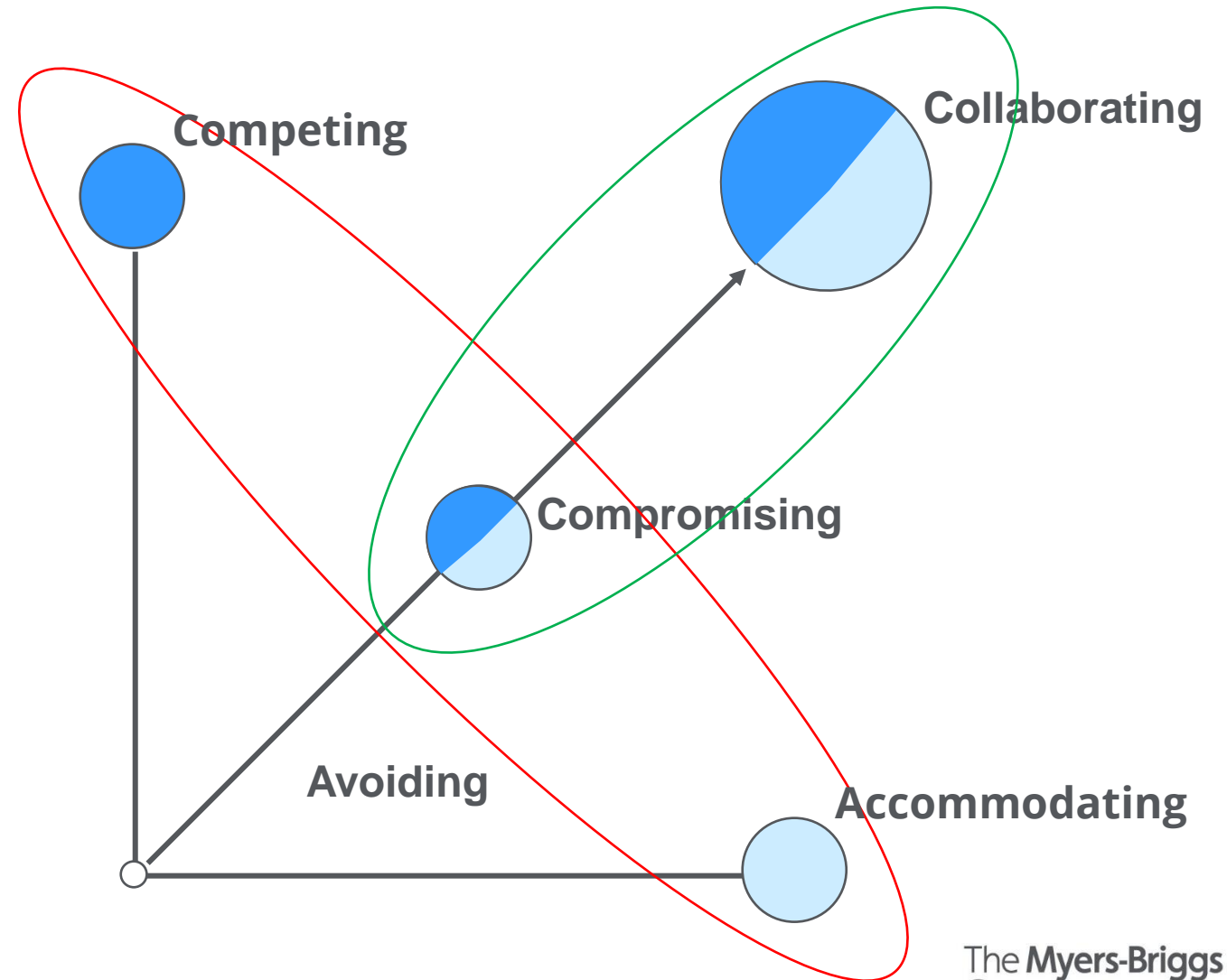
Source: K. Thomas, *Introduction to Conflict Management*, 2002

The Myers-Briggs Company

Those with polarized views often use the Competing mode.

Win-Lose Framing - Distributive dimension
Competing approach seeks to win at all cost. Can cause distain, tension, and even hostility.

Win-Win Framing - Integrative dimension
Collaborating seeks to develop solution that will address most of the stakeholders' needs.



Source: K. Thomas, *Introduction to Conflict Management*, 2002, pg. 8-9

The Myers-Briggs
Company

Polarization often begins with competing views and create undesirable risks.

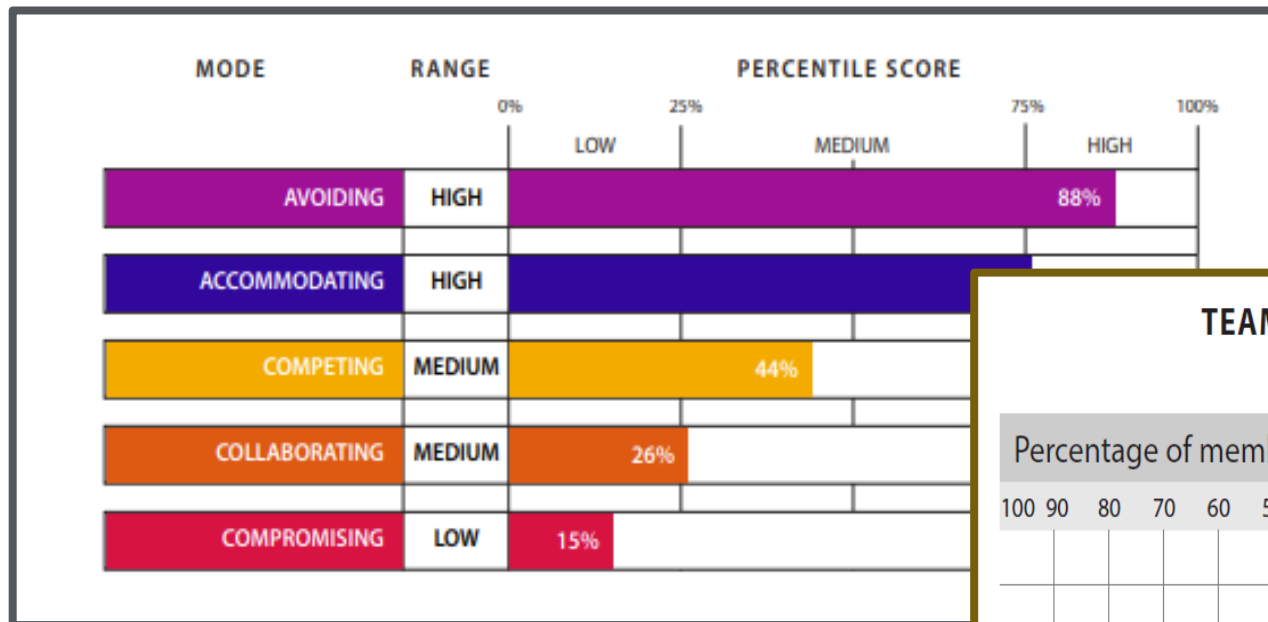
Competing - Advantages	Collaborating - Advantages
Decisive	Requires identifying interests for both parties
Strong, focused point of view	Integrates interest of both parties
Defends position and interest at all cost	Can build trust
Can be very efficient if others accommodate	Often superior outcome
Competing - Disadvantages	Collaborating - Disadvantages
Decrease trust	Takes longer
Decrease credibility	Requires superior listening skills
Sabotage, retaliation	Necessitates open minds
Poor relationships	Requires creative problem solving

How the TKI® Assessment Can Help Employees Understand and Handle Opposing Views

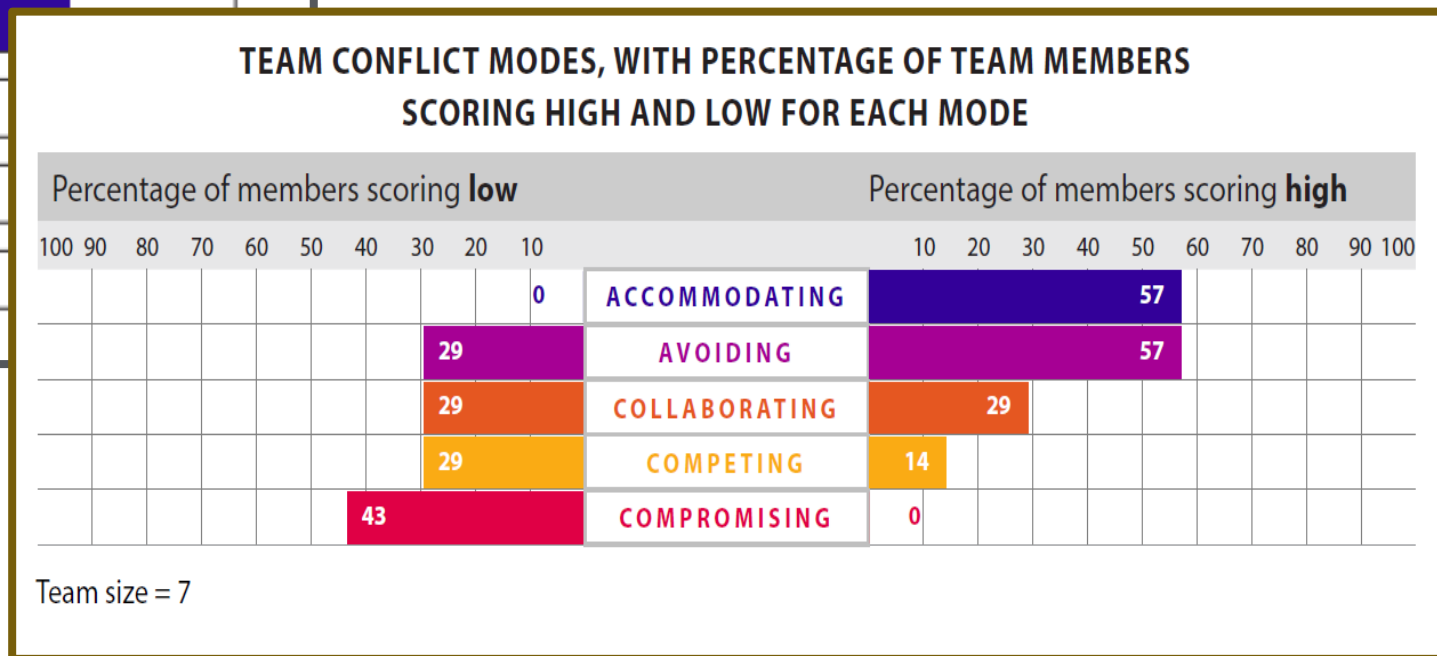
- Appreciate that differing viewpoints can be handled in a constructive manner.
- Know your own, and perhaps your team's, conflict-handling profile.
- Assess whether you are using a distributive framing and the consequences of that approach.
- Determine if it is possible to use a more integrative (collaborative) approach to the problem where both parties can have their needs met.



The TKI® assessment identifies individual and/or team conflict-handling approaches.



← Individual profile



Team profile →

Agenda

Polarization in the Workplace

- Definition of Polarization
- From Disagreement to Polarization
- Extent of the Problem
- Causes of Polarization
- Costs and Benefits

A Framework for Thinking about Polarization

- Polarization and Conflict Management
- Five Approaches to Handling Conflict
- Win-Lose Framing
- Competing and Its Undesirable Risks

Strategies for Addressing Polarization

- Seven Exercises That Address Polarization
- What Leaders Can Do to Manage Polarization

Exercise 1: Resolving Frozen Misperceptions

Purpose: Address frozen stereotypes and raise empathy for both parties.

Directions:

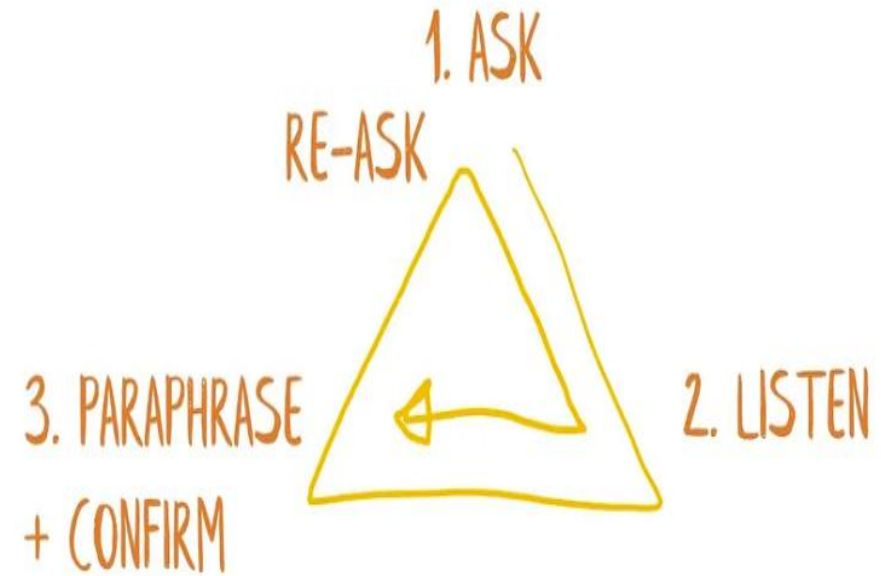
1. Each party makes three lists on poster papers.
 - a. How I perceive the other
 - b. How I perceive myself
 - c. How I think the other party sees me
2. Share lists and ask clarifying questions for understanding (not judgment).
3. Discuss gaps and determine best conflict-handling mode to address the gaps.

Note: A more thorough explanation of the exercise can be found at [Resolving the Frozen Misperceptions Between Two Warring Parties - Kilmann Diagnostics](#)



Exercise 2: Listening Triangle

1. Ask a real and powerful question.
2. Actively listen, in other words paraphrase and confirm that you got it right.
3. Re-ask. Don't move on to another topic. Shift your question just a little bit to dive one step deeper and help triangulate your understanding of the person's position.



WWW.THECONVERSATIONFACTORY.COM

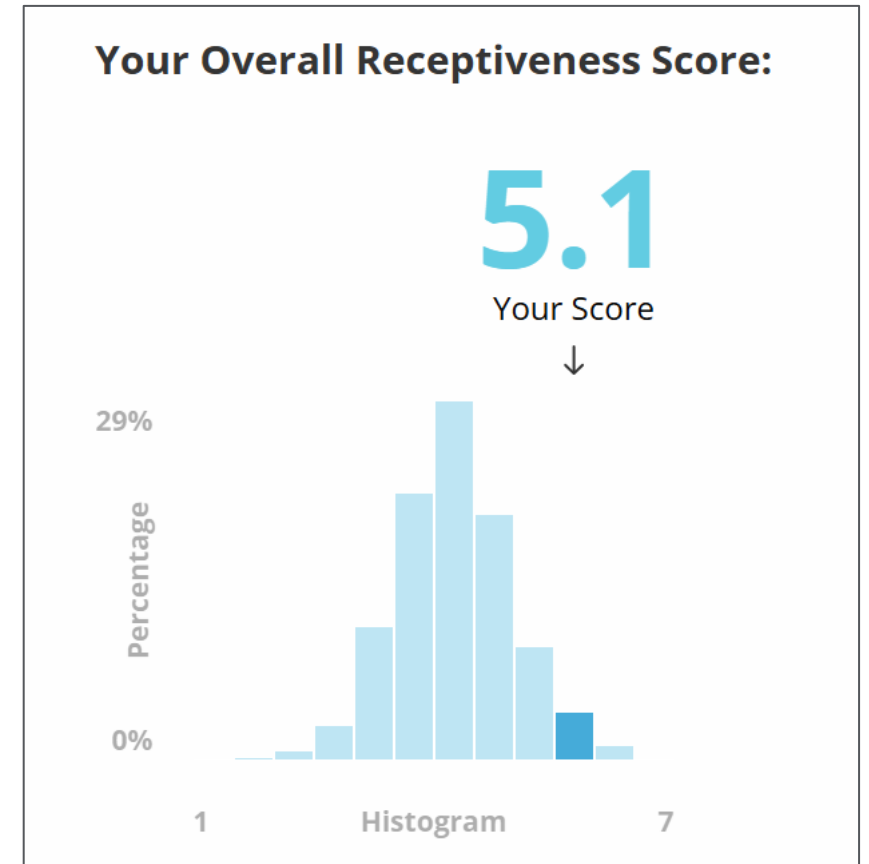
Sources: Managing in a Polarized World, *HBR* 2022
Pixar <https://www.oscartrimboli.com/podcast/120/>

Exercise 3: Receptiveness Assessment

Receptive people:

- Are more willing to engage with information that opposes their beliefs on important, hot-button topics. For example, they might be more willing to read news or social media from the other side or have conversations with people they disagree with.
- Are more willing to think hard about the opposing perspective, instead of quickly dismissing it. This often leads to having a more favorable opinion of those on the other side and their arguments.
- May not be willing to change their mind or compromise. It simply means that they are ready to seriously consider the arguments on both sides of an issue.

Source: <https://receptiveness.net/survey.html>



Exercise 4: Conversation Receptiveness

1. Acknowledge others' point ("I understand that you believe").
2. Hedge your own claims (use "sometimes" and "often" to soften your assertions).
3. Do not contradict the other's view (acknowledge room for doubt to signal humility and recognize others' valid points).
4. Try to find the places of agreement with the other's point of view.



Source: Yeomans, et. al. Conversational Receptiveness, 2020, HBR.

Exercise 5: Thank You, Because.....

Purpose:

Create effective conversations about opposing views and finding common ground. This approach identifies and appreciates what you value or appreciate about hearing another's point of view.

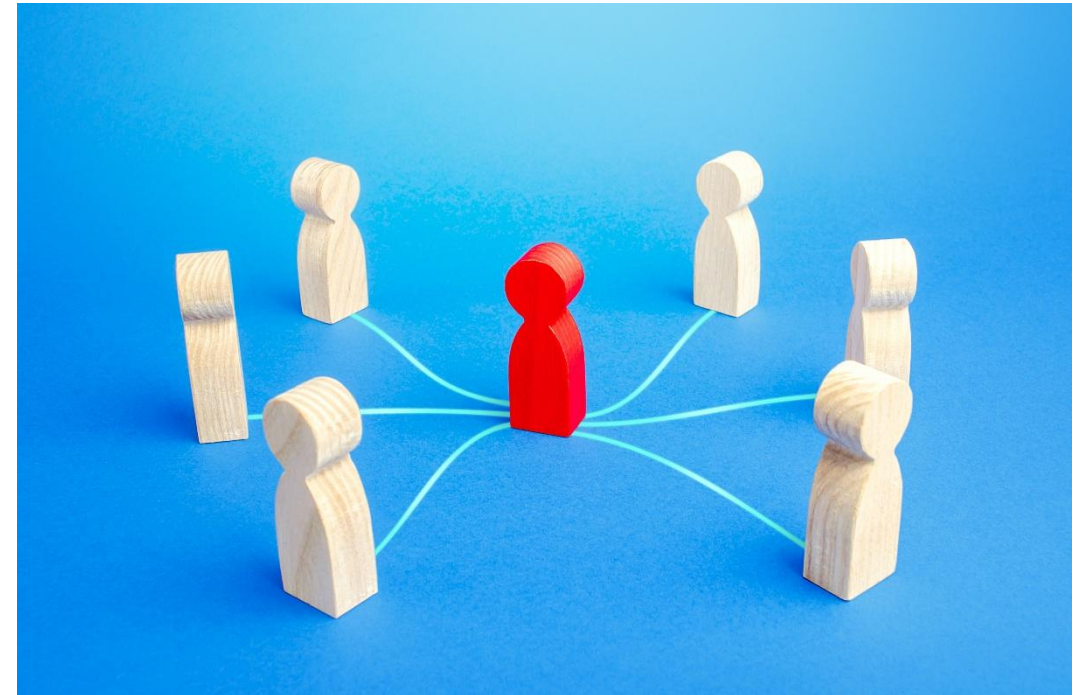
Directions:

1. Thank the other and say what you value or appreciate about their point of view.
2. Follow with your own point of view. Looking for common ground.



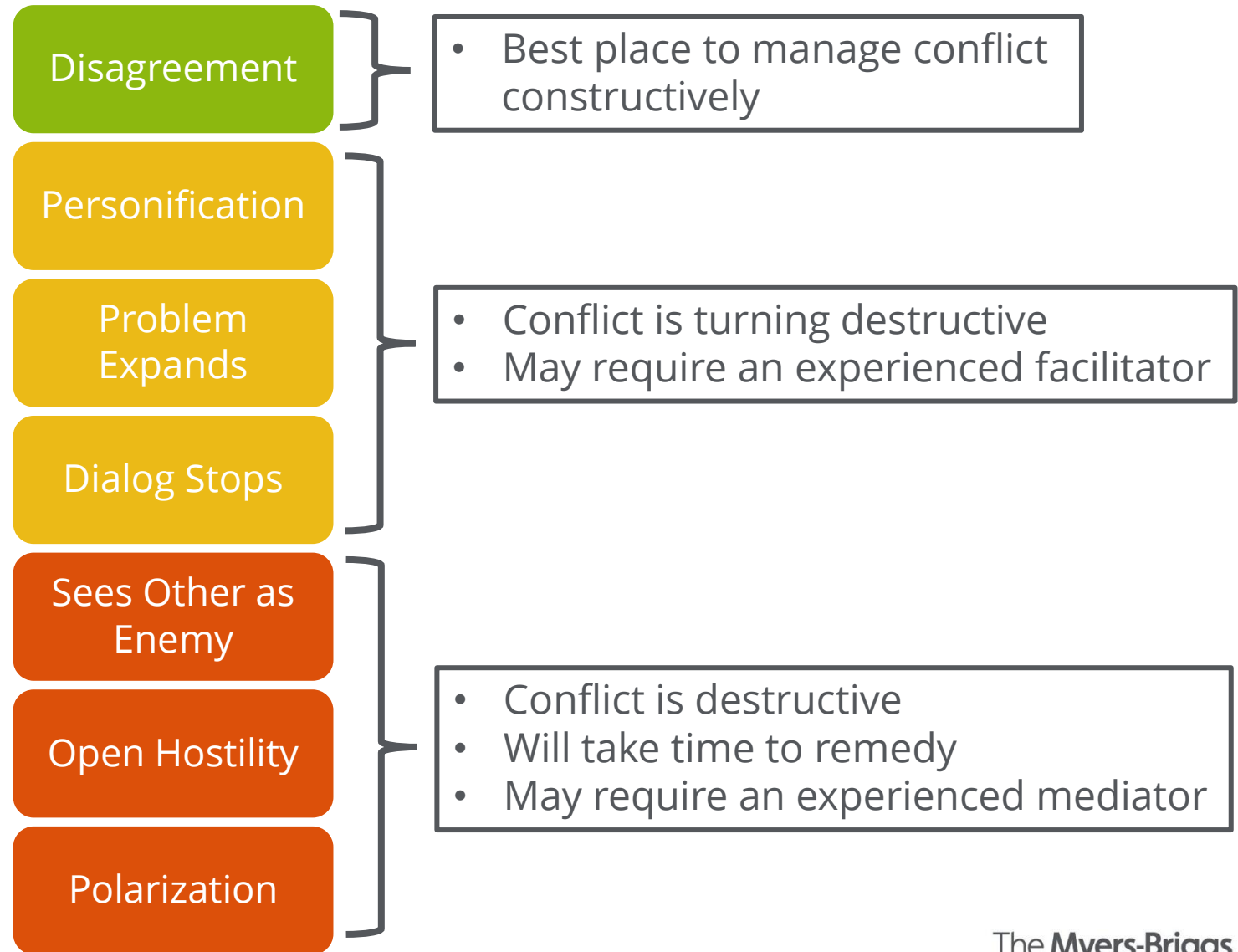
Exercise 6: Try Building Consensus to Address Conflict

1. Get clear on the issue (e.g., return-to-office mandate).
2. Create space for all to share their interests, needs, and opinions.
3. Develop solutions including pros, cons, and criteria for making a decision.
4. Test for agreement (blocks, stand-asides, reservations, consensus).
5. Identify an action plan and process for adaptations as required.



Source: www.seeds

Exercise 7: Use the Polarization Continuum to Diagnose and Address the Escalation of Workplace Conflict



How Organizational Leaders Can Create an Environment to Reduce Escalation and Promote Constructive Conversations

- Develop organizational norms of workplace civility.
- Map norms to organizational values.
- Communicate clear expectations for acceptable and unacceptable behaviors.
- Leaders should set the tone and model desired behavior.
- Establish HR and legal organizational policies that support constructive conversations.
- Some organizations have created structured spaces to address polarized topics.





Podcast, Webinars, Team Conflict Assessment

Podcast:

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

Webinars:

[Developing Teams Using the TKI Team Report](#)

[Rethinking Intergenerational Conflict at Work](#)

[Navigating Hard Conversations](#)

TKI reports:

[Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument Profile and Interpretive Report](#)

[Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument Team Report and Facilitator's Guide](#)

Suggested Reading

Cohen, T.R. et.al. (Aug 2020). The Art and Science of Disagreeing: How to Create More Effective Conversation About Opposing Views, *Academy of Management Proceedings*.

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.

Health Action Alliance. (Sept 6, 2024). How to Talk About Politics in the Workplace.

Kilmann, R. (2023). *Mastering the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument*.

Monsour, J. et.al (2023). A new leadership challenge: Navigating political polarization in organizational team. *Business Horizons*, 66(6), 729-740.


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.

Yeomans, M., J. et.al. (Sept 2020). Conversational receptiveness: Expressing engagement with opposing views. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 131–148.



Questions?



Thank you for attending.
Slides, recording, and other resources
to follow.

Contact Information for Gail Fann Thomas, EdD

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/gail-fann-thomas-12a7b723/>

gailfanthomas53@gmail.com

