

Conflict Styles

Competing

Win/Lose

Appropriate

Inappropriate

Collaborating

Win/Win

Appropriate

Inappropriate

Compromising

Win/Lose Win/Lose

Appropriate

Inappropriate

Avoiding

Win/Lose

Appropriate

Inappropriate

Accommodating

Win/Lose

Appropriate

Inappropriate

The Five Conflict Styles

(Thomas/Killman, 1972 with further descriptions and analysis by Bonnie Burrell, 2001)

The Competing Style is when you stress your position without considering opposing points of view. This style is highly assertive with minimal cooperativeness; the goal is to win. The competing style is used when a person has to take quick action, make unpopular decisions, handle vital issues, or when one needs protection in a situation where noncompetitive behavior can be exploited. To develop this style you must develop your ability to argue and debate, use your rank or position, assert your opinions and feelings, and learn to state your position and stand your ground.

Overuse of this style can lead to lack of feedback, reduced learning, and low empowerment. This can result in being surrounded by "Yes-Men". People who overuse the competing style often use inflammatory statements due to a lack of interpersonal skills training. When overuse is taken to an extreme the person will create errors in the implementation of the task by withholding needed information, talking behind another person's back (or "back-stabbing"), using eye motions and gestures designed to express disapproval, and creating distractions by fiddling or interrupting. Overuse of this style can be exhibited through constant tension or anger and occasional outbursts of violent temper.

Under use of the competing style leads to a lowered level of influence, indecisiveness, slow action, and withheld contributions. When the competing style is underused some emergent behaviors people exhibit include justifying the behaviors, demanding concessions as a condition of working on the problem, threatening separation as a way of making others give in, and launching personal attacks.

The Avoiding Style is when you do not satisfy your concerns or the concerns of the other person. This style is low assertiveness and low cooperativeness. The goal is to delay. It is appropriate to use this style when there are issues of low importance, to reduce tensions, or to buy time. Avoidance is also appropriate when you are in a low power position and have little control over the situation, when you need to allow others to deal with the conflict, or when the problem is symptomatic of a much larger issue and you need to work on the core issue. To develop skills in this style use foresight in knowing when to withdraw, learn to sidestep loaded questions or sensitive areas by using diplomacy, become skillful at creating a sense of timing, and practice leaving things unresolved.

Overuse of the avoidance style can result in a low level of input, decision-making by default, and allowing issues to fester, which can produce a

breakdown in communication between team members. This can inhibit brainstorming sessions from being productive and can prevent the team from functioning. People who overuse avoidance feel they cannot speak frankly without fear of repercussions. The overuse of conflict avoidance can often be a result of childhood experiences, past work-related incidents, and negative experiences with conflict resolution. Behaviors associated with the overuse of avoidance include being silent, sullen, and untruthful when asked if something is wrong being. A milder form of avoidance behavior is when the team member procrastinates about getting work done and deliberately takes an opposing point of view inappropriately during a decision-making situation, or is timid, withdrawn, or shy. Extreme behaviors can occur when avoidance is overused. A person begins to be negative, critical and sarcastic. Other extreme avoidance behaviors include becoming passive aggressive by being late and not paying attention at meetings. It also lends a greater importance to this style as compared to the other styles because you have devoted such a disproportionate amount of time to the style.)

Under use of the avoidance style results in hostility and hurt feelings. In addition, work can become overwhelming because too many issues are taken on at once, resulting in an inability to prioritize and delegate. When avoidance is underused a team member may deny that there is a problem and allow their hurt feelings to prevent communication.

The Compromising Style is finding a middle ground or forgoing some of your concerns and committing to other's concerns. This style is moderately assertive and moderately cooperative; the goal is to find middle ground. The compromising style is used with issues of moderate importance, when both parties are equally powerful and equally committed to opposing views. This style produces temporary solutions and is appropriate when time is a concern, and as a back up for the competing and collaborating styles when they are unsuccessful in resolving the situation. Compromising skills include the ability to communicate and keep the dialogue open, the ability to find an answer that is fair to both parties, the ability to give up part of what you want, and the ability to assign value to all aspects of the issue.

Overuse of the compromising style leads to loss of long-term goals, a lack of trust, creation of a cynical environment, and being viewed as having no firm values. Overuse of compromise can result in making concessions to keep people happy without resolving the original conflict.

Under use leads to unnecessary confrontations, frequent power struggles, and ineffective negotiating.

The Collaborating Style is when the concern is to satisfy both sides. It is highly assertive and highly cooperative; the goal is to find a "win/win" solution. Appropriate uses for the collaborating style include integrating

solutions, learning, merging perspectives, gaining commitment, and improving relationships. Using this style can support open discussion of issues, task proficiency, equal distribution of work amongst the team members, better brainstorming, and development of creative problem solving. This style is appropriate to use frequently in a team environment. Collaborating skills include the ability to use active or effective listening, confront situations in a non-threatening way, analyze input, and identify underlying concerns.

Overuse of the collaborating style can lead to spending too much time on trivial matters, diffusion of responsibility, being taken advantage of, and being overloaded with work. Under use can result in using quick fix solutions, lack of commitment by other team members, disempowerment, and loss of innovation.

The Accommodating Style is foregoing your concerns in order to satisfy the concerns of others. This style is low assertiveness and high cooperativeness; the goal is to yield. The accommodating style is appropriate to use in situations when you want to show that you are reasonable, develop performance, create good will, keep peace, retreat, or for issues of low importance. Accommodating skills include the ability to sacrifice, the ability to be selfless, the ability to obey orders, and the ability to yield.

Overuse of the accommodating style results in ideas getting little attention, restricted influence, loss of contribution, and anarchy. People who overuse the accommodating style exhibit a lack of desire to change and usually demonstrate anxiety over future uncertainties. One of their main desires may be to keep everything the same. When accommodating is overused certain behaviors emerge. Some of these emergent behaviors include giving up personal space, making "me" or other victim statements, being overly helpful and then holding a grudge, and speaking in an extremely quiet almost unintelligible voice. Under use of the accommodating style can result in lack of rapport, low morale, and an inability to yield. When the accommodating style is underused a person may display apathy as a way of not addressing the anger or hurt, and make statements full of innuendo and double meanings.

Interpreting Your Thomas Killman Conflict Mode Inventory Scores

Usually, after getting the results of any test or assessment, the first question people ask is: "What are the right answers?" In the case of conflict-handling behavior, there are no universal right answers. All five modes are useful in some situations: each represents a set of useful social skills. Our conventional wisdom recognizes, for example, that often "two heads are better than one" (Collaborating). But it also says, "'Kill your enemies with kindness" (Accommodating), "Split the difference" (Compromising), "Leave well enough alone" (Avoiding), and "Might makes right" (Competing). The effectiveness of a given conflict-handling mode depends upon the requirements of the specific conflict situation and the skill with which the mode is used.

Each of us is capable of using all five conflict-handling modes: none of us can be characterized as having a single, rigid style of dealing with conflict. However, any given individual uses some modes better than others and therefore, tends to rely upon those modes more heavily than others, whether because of temperament or practice.

The conflict behaviors which individuals use are therefore the result of both their personal predispositions and the requirements of the situations in which they find themselves. The Thomas-Killman Conflict Mode Instrument is designed to assess this mix of conflict-handling modes.

To help you judge how appropriate your utilization of the five modes is, we have listed a number of uses for each mode based on lists generated by company presidents. Your score, high or low, indicates how often you tend to utilize each mode in the appropriate situation. There is a possibility that your social skills lead you to rely upon some conflict behaviors more or less than necessary. To help you determine if this is a problem for you we have also listed some diagnostic questions to serve as warning signals for the under or overuse of each mode.

A. Competing

Uses:

- ◆ When quick, decisive action is vital – e.g., emergencies.
- ◆ On important issues where unpopular courses of action need to be implemented – e.g., cost cutting, enforcing unpopular rules, discipline.
- ◆ On issues vital to company welfare when you know you're right.
- ◆ To protect yourself against people who take advantage of noncompetitive behavior.
- ◆ If you scored High:

- ◆ Are you surrounded by "yes" men? (If so, perhaps it's because they have learned that it's unwise to disagree with you, or have given up trying to influence you. This closes you off from information.)
- ◆ Are subordinates afraid to admit ignorance and uncertainties to you? (In competitive climates, one must fight for influence and respect – which means acting more certain and confident than one feels. The upshot is that people are less able to ask for information and opinion – they are less able to learn.)

If you scored Low:

- ◆ 1. Do you often feel powerless in situations? (It may be because you are unaware of the power you do have, unskilled in its use, or uncomfortable with the idea of using it. This may hinder your effectiveness by restricting your influence.)
- ◆ 2. Do you have trouble taking a firm stand, even when you see the need? (Sometimes concerns for other's feelings or anxieties about the use of power cause us to vacillate, which may mean postponing the decision and adding to the suffering and/or resentment of others.)

B. Collaborating

Uses:

- ◆ To find an integrative solution when both sets of concerns are too important to be compromised.
- ◆ When your objective is to learn – e.g., testing your own assumptions, understanding the views of others.
- ◆ To merge insights from people with different perspectives on a problem.
- ◆ To gain commitment by incorporating other's concerns into a consensual decision.
- ◆ To work through hard feelings which have been interfering with an interpersonal relationship.

If you scored High:

- Do you spend time discussing issues in depth that do not seem to deserve it? (Collaboration takes time and energy – perhaps the scarcest organizational resources. Trivial problems don't require optimal solutions, and not all personal differences need to be hashed out. The overuse of collaboration and consensual decision-making sometimes represents a desire to minimize risk by diffusing responsibility for a decision or by postponing action.)
- Does your collaborative behavior fail to elicit collaborative responses from others? (The exploratory and tentative nature of some collaborative

behavior may make it easy for others to disregard collaborative overtures, or the trust and openness may be taken advantage of. You may be missing some cues that indicate the presence of defensiveness, strong feelings, impatience, competitiveness, or conflicting interests.)

If you scored Low:

Is it hard for you to see differences as opportunities for joint gain – as opportunities to learn or solve problems? (Although there are often threatening or unproductive aspects of conflict, indiscriminate pessimism can prevent you from seeing collaborative possibilities and thus deprive you of the mutual gains and satisfactions which accompany successful collaboration.)

Are subordinates uncommitted to your decisions or policies? (Perhaps their own concerns are not being incorporated into those decisions or policies.)

C. Compromising

Uses:

When goals are moderately important, but not worth the effort or potential disruption of more assertive modes.

When two opponents with equal power are strongly committed to mutually exclusive goals – e.g., as in labor-management bargaining.

To achieve temporary settlements to complex issues.

To arrive at expedient solutions under time pressure.

As a backup mode when collaboration or competition fails to be successful.

If you scored High:

1. Do you concentrate so heavily upon the practicalities and tactics of compromise that you sometimes lose sight of larger issues – principles, values, long-term objectives, or company/team welfare?

2. Does an emphasis on bargaining and trading create a cynical climate of gamesmanship? (Such a climate might undermine interpersonal trust and deflect attention away from the merits of the issues discussed.)

If you scored Low:

Do you find yourself too sensitive or embarrassed to be effective in bargaining situations?

Do you find it hard to make concessions? (Without this safety valve, you may have trouble getting gracefully out of mutually destructive arguments, power struggles, etc.)

D. Avoiding

Uses:

When an issue is trivial, of only passing importance, or when other more important issues are pressing.

When you perceive no chance of satisfying your concerns – e.g., when you have low power or you are frustrated by something which would be very difficult to change (national policies, someone's personality structure, etc.)

When the potential damage of confronting a conflict outweighs the benefits of its resolution.

To let people cool down – to reduce tensions to a productive level and to regain perspective and composure.

When gathering more information outweighs the advantages of an immediate decision.

When others can resolve the conflict more effectively.

When the issue seems tangential or symptomatic of another more basic issue.

If you scored High:

Does your coordination suffer because people have trouble getting your inputs on issues?

Does it often appear that people are "walking on eggshells?" (Sometimes a dysfunctional amount of energy can be devoted to caution and the avoiding of issues, indicating that issues need to be faced and resolved.)

Are decisions on important issues made by default?

If you scored Low:

1. Do you find yourself hurting people's feelings or stirring up hostilities? (You may need to exercise more discretion in confronting issues or more tact in framing issues in non-threatening ways. Tact is partially the art of avoiding potentially disruptive aspects of an issue.)

2. Do you often feel harried or overwhelmed by a number of issues? (You may need to devote more time to setting priorities – deciding which issues are relatively unimportant and perhaps delegating them to others.)

E. Accommodating

Uses:

When you realize that you are wrong (or less experienced or knowledgeable)– to allow a better position to be heard, to from others, and to show that you are reasonable. 8"

When the issue is much more important to the other person than to yourself – to satisfy the needs of others, and as a goodwill gesture to help maintain a cooperative relationship.

To build up social credits for later issues which are important to you.

When continued competition would only damage your cause – when you are outmatched and losing.

When preserving harmony and avoiding disruption are especially important.

To aid in the managerial development of subordinates by allowing them to experiment and learn from their own mistakes.

If you scored High:

Do you feel that your own ideas and concerns are not getting the attention they deserve? (Deferring too much to the concerns of others can deprive you of influence, respect, and recognition. It also deprives the organization of your potential contributions.)

Is discipline lax? (Although discipline for its own sake may be of little value, there are often rules, procedures, and assignments whose implementation is crucial for you or the organization.)

If you scored Low:

Do you have trouble building goodwill with others? (Accommodation on minor issues that are important to others is a gesture of goodwill.)

Do others often seem to regard you as unreasonable?

Do you have trouble admitting it when you are wrong?

Do you recognize legitimate exceptions to rules?

Do you know when to give up?

Now that you know a little more about conflict styles and your personal preferences, the goal is to develop skills in all of the styles so that you can mold conflict into a constructive form. Conflict can be used to help expose important issues, develop learning and creativity, and can help to develop trust and openness (Brake & Walker, 1995). Once you understand your styles you can view conflict management through five interrelated issues: source issues, strategy issues, context issues, reaction issues, and power issues.

Source issues in teams can result from individuals having different values, beliefs, and perceptions of self-interest. Team members can have conflicting goals and priorities, contrasting methodologies, different perceptions of events, and disparities in the distribution of work.

Strategy issues arise when people don't have the skills to choose the appropriate conflict management style. Conflict can escalate when incompatible potential solutions to conflicts have not been analyzed and when there is no acknowledgement of the importance of the issue to

individual team members.

Context issues are concerned with where and when the conflict is taking place, which includes culture, environment, and the history of the conflict. Conflict will escalate because of context issues when there is a loyalty to a specific sub group within the team, or when one member feels they must support friends within the team; this creates factions or polarized subgroups. Another context issue that can be cultural is when the team members admire or tolerate displays of anger or stubbornness; this can result in conflict escalation.

Reaction issues involve the emotions being expressed during the conflict. An example of a reaction issue is when team members see themselves as under attack. Conflicts can escalate when one or more team members perceive they are losing the conflict.

Power issues usually involve resources such as money, time, knowledge, skill, information authority, legitimacy, and networking issues. Conflict escalation occurs in this context when there is a lack of authority to restrain hostile behavior.

Recognizing the different aspects of a conflict and the different manners in which conflict escalates allows you to deal with situations more effectively. When a conflict has high intensity and detrimentally effects the entire team the plan should be to narrow the issues down to specific issues so it can be resolved. The SOLVE, the Anger Action Model, allows you to narrow the issues and settle them.

OTFD - Open The Front Door Communication Conflict Mapping

OTFD

Observe: Concrete, factual observations, not evaluative, descriptive “I noticed...”

Think: Thoughts based on observation, “I think...”

Feel: Emotions, “I feel...”

Desire/Need: Specific request or inquiry about desired outcome, “I would like...”

Examples:

Conflict Mapping:

Observe:

Think:

Feel:

Desire/Need:

Adapted from Tasha Souza, Humboldt State University, and the Learning Forum used in When Voices Get Hot: Preparing yourself for constructive dialogue in the classroom –a workshop by Dr. Bridget Arend and Dr. Nicole Joseph at the 2015 University of Denver Diversity Summit