

Leadership Guide for Handling Guide

Conflict happens, whether we want it to or not. Most of us have a strong, visceral reaction to conflict, including (but not limited to) fear, avoidance, excitement and/or dread. However, when you boil it down, conflict is just when one person's desires are different from the other person. Yet the emotions that conflict evokes can often make situations seem explosive.

Leaders need to manage conflict when it arises. So where do leaders start when they want to understand the conflict styles of themselves and others? My favorite tool for developing this knowledge is the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI).

What is TKI?

TKI is a tool that assesses an individual's typical behavior in conflict situations, describing the behaviors along two dimensions: assertiveness and cooperativeness. TKI helps leaders understand how interpersonal group dynamics are affected by conflict-handling styles, as well as helps them make informed decisions about choosing an appropriate style when approaching a conflict situation.

Let's go through each of the five conflict-handling styles.

TKI Five Conflict-Handling Styles



Competing: You try to satisfy your own concerns at another's expense. You win and they lose. Some people think competing is bad. I counter that it's not bad; competition is necessary at times, based on the situation. However, if you only manage conflict through competition, then you are ineffectively managing situations and people.

Collaborating: You try to find a solution to conflict that satisfies all concerned—a win-win. Collaboration takes a lot of time, resources, energy and bandwidth. Though many leaders encourage collaboration, it is often difficult for both parties to get exactly what they want, which is why it is often used in high risk situations. Often, when people say “collaborate” they actually mean either “compromise” or just “work together.”

Compromising: Your solution only partially satisfies each member in the conflict. There are no winners and no losers. Compromise is an acceptable solution; however, be aware that if you are a leader who only compromises, the team may start to game the system and ask for more than what they truly need as they know their leader will compromise during the negotiations.

Avoiding: You don't try to satisfy yourself or other people involved in the conflict. Instead, you stay away from the situation entirely. This mode is used when emotions are running high. To be honest, Avoiding is a Band-Aid for the conflict situation; nothing is resolved and the topic is put into a parking lot until later. The fact is you will have to eventually deal with the conflict.

Accommodating: You are willing to sacrifice your own needs and desires for other people involved in the conflict. You lose and they win. Some people think accommodation equates to being a doormat. I often hear “Only wimps accommodate; I have a business to run.” This is untrue. Accommodation is the best tool to use when you are not the subject matter expert or when the outcome is not that important to you.

Conflict-Handling Type	What it Means
COMPETING	<i>I win, you lose.</i>
COLLABORATING	<i>We both win.</i>
COMPROMISING	<i>Neither of us wins.</i>
AVOIDING	<i>Nobody wins.</i>
ACCOMMODATING	<i>I lose, you win.</i>

Effective leaders need to understand all five conflict-handling modes, and be able to identify the best mode to use for various situations. To help illustrate when to use, and when not to use, each conflict-handling mode, I've developed a cheat sheet.

Conflict-Handling Cheat Sheet

Below you will find an explanation of when to use, and when not to use, each conflict-handling mode in relation to common conflicts encountered in the business world. Also included are signs that indicate you may be overusing one particular mode.

COMPETING

When to use:

- There is an emergency that requires quick and decisive action.
- When unpopular steps are necessary, such as enforcing rules, disciplining team members or cutting costs.
- The company is on the line and you know what it will take to get it back on track.
- Some people will take advantage of those who display noncompetitive behavior. In this case, it is necessary to adopt a competitive strategy to protect yourself and your interests.
- Job interviews, negotiating pay and getting on your manager's calendar.

When not to use:

- If the outcome doesn't really matter to you and there is no reason to compete.
- When you are not the subject matter expert, competing for the strongest voice is inappropriate and will create even more conflict.
- It is easy to become competitive when you are angry and want to prove a point. Using whatever power you have to express this anger is not effective behavior for leaders.

You may be overusing the competing mode of conflict-handling if you find yourself surrounded by "yes people," or if others are afraid to admit mistakes or ask you questions.

ACCOMMODATING

When to use:

- Preserving harmony is the most important aspect of the conflict situation.
- The issue at hand is much more important to the other person.
- You realize you are wrong. Accommodating in this situation shows that you are reasonable.
- You want to build social credits for future use.
- You are outmatched; it would only damage your cause in the long run if you didn't accommodate.
- Employee development is your goal; letting your team experiment and learn from their mistakes will enable that.

When not to use:

- Safety and security are paramount to resolving the conflict.
- The outcome of the conflict is vital to the organization's success.

You may be overusing the accommodating mode if discipline in the organization is lax, or if you feel your ideas and concerns don't get the appropriate level of attention.

AVOIDING

When to use:

- Emotions are high, and people need to cool down.
- The issue at hand is actually just a result of a much simpler issue that can be solved more easily.
- Your team is fully capable of solving the conflict without your involvement.
- More information should be gathered before facing the conflict, in order to resolve it more productively.
- The benefit of facing the conflict does not outweigh the cost of doing so.
- There are more pressing issues at hand.

When not to use:

- The decision at hand must be made quickly.
- The core reason is to avoid a frank conversation.

You may be overusing the avoiding mode if there is coordination trouble due to waiting on input, there is an atmosphere of “walking on eggshells,” or decisions about important issues are being made by default.

COLLABORATING

When to use:

- Your objective is to learn from the conflict. Collaborating is a good way to explore other people’s views.
- There are hard feelings between members of the conflict that need to be resolved to improve the organization as a whole.
- The concerns of both parties are too important to be compromised.

When not to use:

- A quick decision is imperative to the situation.
- Resources are tight.
- The conflict is trivial, and doesn’t need the time necessary for collaborating.

You may be overusing the collaborative approach to conflict if others are uncommitted to your decisions or policies.

COMPROMISING

When to use:

- The potential disruption involved with asserting your goals is not worth the effort.
- The opposing members of the conflict are of equal power standing.
- You realize the situation is complicated and needs more time to solve than is available. A temporary solution is needed.
- There is immense time pressure.

When not to use:

- When compromising ultimately undermines the values and principles of the organization.
- If an attitude of gaming is noticed, which will deflect attention away from the merits of the actual issues at hand.

You may be overusing the compromising mode if the insistence on compromising takes away focus on larger issues, or if you notice a cynical climate of gamesmanship.

To be most effective, leaders need to use all of these conflict styles. Being adaptable and nimble is a strength when it comes to facing conflict. Understanding these different ways of approaching conflict also develops Emotional Intelligence (EQ), another key element to successful leadership.

Time to Test Your Conflict-Handling Skills

Do you have a good grasp of your preferred conflict style? While experiencing conflict, do you feel you are aware enough to adopt the most productive conflict-handling mode? [I invite you to put your skills to the test.](#)

I've created four conflict scenarios. Your job is to read them, and choose the best conflict-handling mode (or modes) to use in each situation. You'll find an answer key at the bottom.

[Test your skills here](#), and please let us know how you did in the comment section below!

For a wonderful resource on TKI, please visit CPP: The People Development People.