

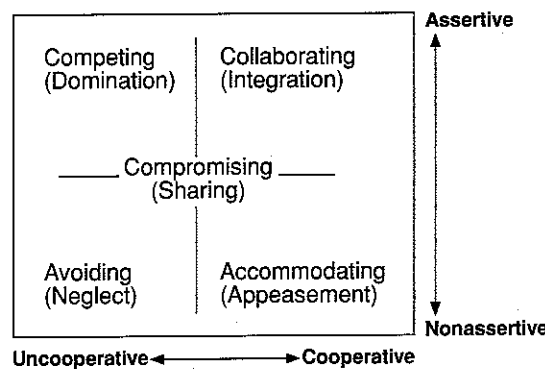
Modes of Conflict

Thomas (1976) defines conflict as the "process which begins when one party perceives that the other has frustrated, or is about to frustrate, some concern of his" (p. 891). *Concerns* in this sense refer to needs, wants, and values. Thus, "conflict situations" are situations in which the needs, wants, or values of two parties clash or in some way interfere with each other.

Thomas (1976) argues that conflict itself is not harmful. It can be made helpful or harmful, however, depending on how one handles and responds to the conflict. Similarly, Thomas and Kilmann (1974) theorize that all reactions to conflict stem from two general impulses: (a) the desire to satisfy personal concerns, which is manifested as *assertive* behavior, and (b) the desire to satisfy the concerns of others, which is manifested as *nonassertive* behavior. These two behavioral dimensions provide the foundation for what Thomas and Kilmann call *conflict-handling modes*.

Five Basic Reactions to Conflict

Thomas and Kilmann (1974) discovered that people react in one of five basic ways when faced with interpersonal conflict: by *competing*, *collaborating*, *compromising*, *avoiding*, or *accommodating*. Working from research by Thomas (1976) and by Blake and Mouton (1964), Thomas and Kilmann developed a figure that illustrates these behaviors. The five behaviors are arranged along two dimensional axes: from *assertive to nonassertive* and from *cooperative to uncooperative*. The figure below depicts the two dimensions and the various responses to conflict.



Modes of Handling Conflict

This two dimensional model of conflict-handling behavior is adapted from "Conflict and Conflict Management" by Kenneth Thomas in *The Handbook of Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, edited by Marvin D. Dunnette. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1983. Adapted and used with permission of Marvin D. Dunnette.

Competing

The competitive style is characterized by a desire to satisfy one's own concerns at the expense of others. Competitively oriented people often act in an aggressive and uncooperative manner. Win-lose power struggles and attempts to dominate are common. The opposite of the competing mode is the accommodating mode.

Collaborating

The collaborative style is characterized by a desire to satisfy both parties' concerns in a dispute. People with a collaborative orientation tend to demonstrate highly assertive and highly cooperative behavior. Collaborative people value mutual benefit, integration, and win-win solutions. The opposite of collaborating is avoiding.

Compromising

The compromising style is an intermediate, "middle-of-the-road" approach to conflict. Compromising people are satisfied if both parties in a dispute achieve moderate—if perhaps incomplete—satisfaction. Each side gives up something to gain something in exchange. A person who practices the collaborative style neither fully avoids the problem nor fully collaborates with the other party. The compromising mode is at the midpoint of both the cooperativeness and the assertiveness scales.

Avoiding

People who practice the avoiding style tend to behave as though they were indifferent both to their own concerns and to the concerns of others. The avoiding orientation often is expressed through nonassertive and uncooperative behavior. Avoiders prefer apathy, isolation, and withdrawal to facing conflicts. They tend to rely on fate to solve problems instead of trying to make things happen.

When faced with a potential conflict, an avoider might seek to distract attention from the issue or might attempt to ignore the issue entirely. Depending on the circumstances, this behavior can be perceived either as evasive or as effective diplomatic maneuvering.

Accommodating

People who favor the accommodating style are more concerned with pleasing others than with meeting their own needs. They tend to be nonassertive and cooperative. People who practice this style of conflict management sacrifice their needs and desires in order to keep the peace and to make others happy.

According to Thomas and Kilmann, people are not locked into one style of conflict management and potentially can utilize all the styles. However, individual differences and experiences tend to make each person more comfortable with one or two styles; these styles, therefore, are the ones that the person is most likely to employ.

The Instrument

Thomas and Kilmann (1974) developed the *Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument* to assess people's preferred modes of response to conflict situations. The instrument¹ consists of thirty forced-choice questions. Each question deals with how respondents believe they would behave in conflict situations. The instrument is self-scored and provides immediate feedback to each respondent.

Conflict-Mode Relativity

Thomas and Kilmann believe that none of the conflict-handling modes are inherently superior to the others. Just as some leadership theories have suggested that the efficacy of various management styles is determined by situational variables, the model recognizes that the appropriate mode of response to a conflict will vary with the circumstances. The table on the next page summarizes some characteristics of people who favor each of the modes and gives examples of situations for which each mode would be appropriate.

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Conflict-Mode Versatility

Most people could benefit from greater flexibility in their responses to conflict situations. Versatility improves negotiating skills and enables people to cope with many kinds of conflicts—and is helpful for getting what one wants from others. Even if one feels unable to alter one's predominant style of handling conflict, one often can negotiate successfully if one can choose the person with whom to negotiate. For example, an accommodating person should select his or her used-car dealer with great care. On the other hand, that same accommodating person could be very successful in legislative lobbying or in public relations.

References

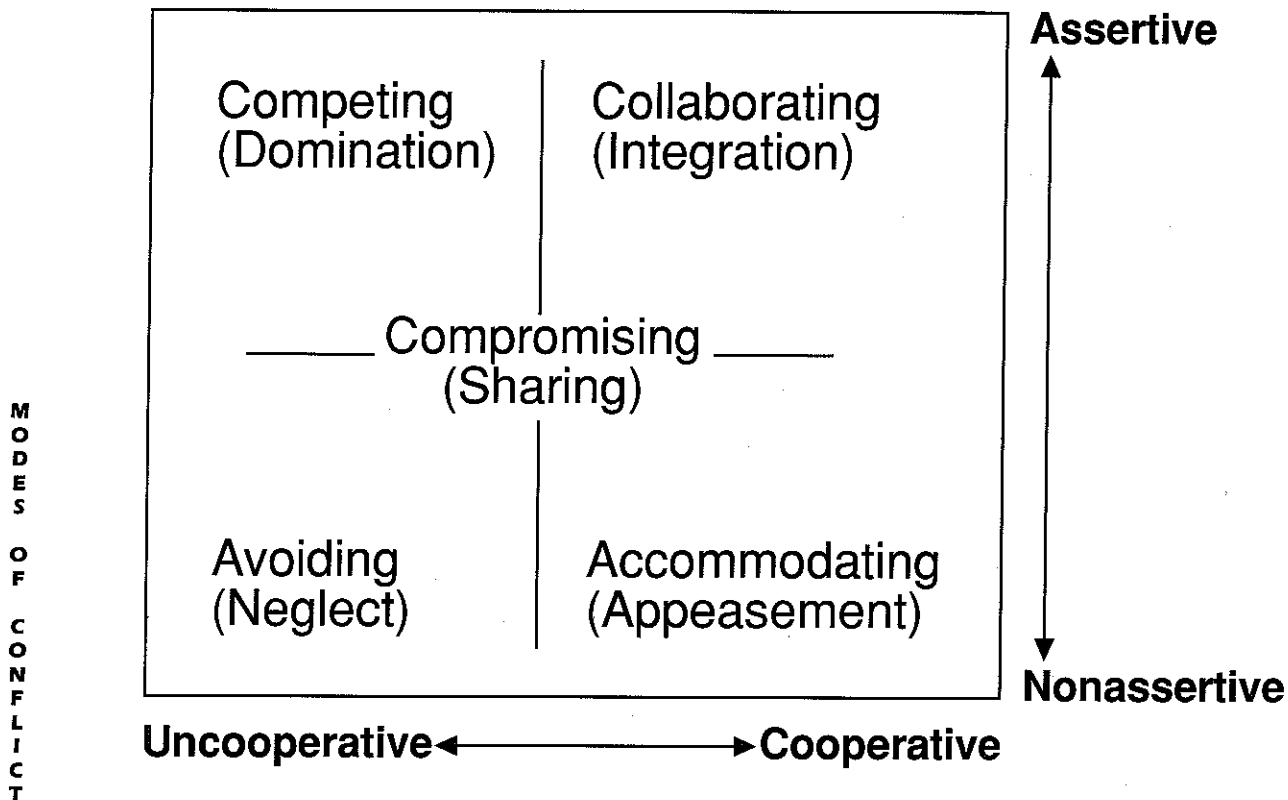
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¹ The *Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument* is available from Xicom, Inc., Sterling Forest, Tuxedo, New York 10987.

Mode	User Characteristics	Appropriate When
Competing	<p>Takes firm stands</p> <p>Can be intimidating to subordinates, who are likely to fear dissent</p>	<p>There is an emergency or crisis</p> <p>A decision is unpopular</p> <p>One is certain that he or she is correct about a crucial matter</p> <p>One is defending against opportunists who might exploit a less combative style</p>
Collaborating	<p>Views disagreements as opportunities to make things better</p> <p>Sometimes tries inappropriately hard to reach consensus on unimportant problems</p>	<p>The desires of both sides are too important for a simple trade-off</p> <p>Attempting to gain insight into somebody else's ideas or opinions</p> <p>Bringing a variety of views to bear on an issue</p> <p>Seeking consensus to obtain joint ownership of the action</p> <p>Overcoming previous hostilities in a relationship</p>
Compromising	<p>Perhaps cynically views the mechanics of compromise as more important than the substantive concerns about the controversy</p> <p>Able to give and take</p> <p>Not timid about the stressful environment of a bargaining situation</p>	<p>The objectives are not inconsequential but conflict would be prohibitively costly</p> <p>Opponents of equal strength are locked in zero-sum bargaining</p> <p>Seeking a quick, temporary fix of a complicated issue</p> <p>Under the pressure of a deadline</p> <p>Collaboration or competition already has failed</p>
Avoiding	<p>Accepts default decisions</p> <p>Withholds contributions to decision making</p> <p>Cautiously evades conflict</p> <p>Does not want to hurt others' feelings</p> <p>Delegates or passes controversies on to others</p>	<p>The controversy is trivial</p> <p>Victory is impossible</p> <p>The payoff for solving the problem is lower than the potential damage of the controversy</p> <p>It is advantageous to let anger and passion recede before tackling the issue</p> <p>Further research is more useful than a quick resolution</p> <p>Someone else can solve the problem better</p> <p>The concern is far from the central issue(s)</p>

Mode	User Characteristics	Appropriate When
Accommodating	Gives in to others when warranted or perhaps when not	You are aware that the other side's position has more merit or justice than your own
	Reasonable	You wish to make amends or reparations
	Willing to admit errors	The controversy matters more to the other party than to you
	Wise enough to surrender when appropriate	You want to build up a "debt" to collect later
	Knows the correct exceptions to policies	The other side holds all the winning cards
		You value peace more than the potential gains in the controversy

**Modes of Response to Conflict As Demonstrated Through
Characteristics and Examples**



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