

CONFLICT RESOLUTION MODES

INTRODUCTION:

Understanding different responses to conflict and the benefit of developing and using the whole spectrum of conflict management skills will be addressed. An instrument will be used in order to learn current personal preferences and levels of flexibility. Constructive and destructive results of conflict will be discussed.

GOAL:

The goal of this module is for you to:

- identify personal preference for managing conflict by completing the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument
- assess conflict situations
- determine the most effective conflict style for a given situation

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

- Stephen R. Covey, The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People, Habit 4
- Commonly asked questions regarding the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument, page 5

***“He who establishes his argument by noise and command,
shows that his reason is weak.”***

Michel de Montaigne

TOPIC OUTLINE

1. Introduction
2. Positive and Negative Results of Conflict
3. Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument
4. Discussing the Five Conflict Modes
 - avoiding
 - competing
 - accommodating
 - compromising
 - collaborating
5. Conclusion

“Every man is in a state of conflict, owing to his attempt to reconcile himself and his relationship with life to his conception of harmony.”

Rebecca West

DIFFICULT BEHAVIORS

*There are common patterns in “Difficult Behavior”
that can be identified and described.
Once you find patterns, you can take effective action.*

Hostile Aggressive – Allow Hostile Aggressives to recapture their composure and then confront them on the issue (not their behavior) at hand by expressing your opinions and perceptions. Demonstrate that you take their issue seriously and that you wish to discuss it immediately or later in private.

Complainers – Determine what lies behind their actions. Complainers point out real problems, but they do it in a manner that evokes defensive responses from others. Focus on problem solving.

Listen attentively to their complaints.

- Acknowledge what they have said in order that they know you understand them.
- Be prepared to interrupt them.
- Avoid limitless responses like always or never.
- Don't agree or apologize.
- State and acknowledge facts without comment and then move right into problem solving.

If you are getting nowhere, ask the Complainer: “what changes would you like to see made?”

The Clam or the Silent/Unresponsive – The thing to focus on here is to get the person to talk to you. Here are some techniques to help open up the Clam:

- Ask open-ended questions, wait for a response.
- Do not fill the silence with your conversation.
- Comment on what's happening and again end your comment with an open-ended question.

If you can't get the Clam to talk, end the meeting and reschedule or tell him what you are planning to do as a result of his not choosing to enter into a discussion.

The Super Agreeable – Super Agreeables can't tell you no because they fear the loss of your approval. To handle a Super Agreeable, it is important to discover the underlying facts and issues that prevent him from taking action. Super Agreeables need to know that you value them. Listen to a Super Agreeable's humor. Often, there are hidden messages in those quips or teasing remarks.

Negativists – These people exercise power over others because they touch that cavern of despair that we all possess. They, like Complainers, feel they have little power to control their own lives and have become embittered by it. The best way to handle Negativists is by making optimistic, but realistic statements about past successes in solving similar problems. It is important not to try to argue Negativists out of their pessimism. Don't get caught up in their negativism. Play the Devil's Advocate yourself in a balanced way and beat them to the punch!

The Know-It-All – The Know-It-All finds security in the accumulation of knowledge and uses it as power. Some important techniques to handle the Know-It-All are:

- Be prepared and know your facts or know the resources available to you to obtain the information.
- Listen carefully and paraphrase the Know-It-All's main points.
- Avoid unchangeable statements.
- Use a question to raise problems.

The Indecisive or Staller – These folks are actually trying to be helpful, but find they are in decision-making positions that force them to support or reject things they would rather avoid in order not to hurt anyone. Some important ways to help the Staller handle decision-making are:

- Encourage the Staller to tell you about the issues by asking open-ended questions and listening for clues to problem areas.
- Help the Staller examine the facts and prioritize them.
- Give support after the decision has been made.

COMMONLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Some questions regularly arise in discussions of the *Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument*. The designers of the instrument have found the following answers helpful.

1. How thoroughly has the TKI been tested?

The TKI has been extensively tested in thousands of companies and organizations, and with hundreds of thousands of individuals on a worldwide basis. It has been the focal point of dozens of articles, doctoral dissertations, and numerous research projects. We have found that (a) the TKI compares favorably in technical qualities (reliability, freedom from bias) to other available measures of the conflict modes; (b) people who take the instrument tend to agree with their scores; and (c) the scores of several different groups of people differ in expected ways (e.g., by sex role, situational power, training, personality).

2. What's the difference between collaborating and compromising?

First of all, it's helpful to distinguish the conflict behaviors people use from the decisions they reach. Two people may begin collaborating (problem-solving), discover that no integrative (win-win) outcomes are possible and therefore settle for a compromise. The scores are assessing behaviors – i.e., the interpersonal “process” that an individual uses in conflict situations, not necessarily the decisions they reach.

As behaviors, collaborating and compromising are quite different. Collaborating means working with the other person to seek solutions which completely satisfy both parties. This involves accepting both parties' concerns as valid and digging into an issue in an attempt to find innovative possibilities. It also means being open and exploratory. In contrast, compromising means seeking an expedient settlement which only partially satisfies both people. It doesn't dig into the underlying problem, but rather seeks a more superficial arrangement – e.g., splitting the difference. It is based upon partial concessions – giving up something to get something – and may be played close to the vest. Compromise splits the pie, while collaborating attempts to make the pie larger.

3. Wouldn't my scores vary if I thought of different specific situations when I filled out the TKI?

To some extent, yes. Since behavior is partially shaped by requirements of a situation, different situations evoke different behaviors. The questions asked were very general to get a mix of conflict behaviors which you use – to ask you to consider the broad range of conflict situations in which you find yourself.

Naturally, if you thought of only a part of those situations one time when taking the TKI, and thought of a different part a second time, then your score might vary somewhat. However, tests of the Instrument indicate that scores are fairly consistent when people take the test on separate occasions.

4. Doesn't the word "collaborating" have negative overtones?

We used this word because it means "working together" –from "co", meaning together, and "labor" meaning to work. In the world of science, for example, two researchers say that they collaborate when they work together on a research project. There it means something very positive.

During war, however, "collaborating with the enemy" has a negative connotation. When a situation is seen as zero-sum – i.e., when "It's us or them" – people see no opportunity for mutual gain. At such times, collaborating is suspect: one should be competing; any concern for the enemy is interpreted as energy spent against us. This negative connotation of "collaborating" is largely a holdover from World War II.

We use the word collaborating because, in its technical sense, it seems to capture best that conflict mode. However, you might prefer to think of it as joint problem solving.

5. What if my scores don't seem to fit me?

In the past, this question has usually meant that the instructions were misunderstood, the test scored incorrectly, or the meaning of the scores misinterpreted. Otherwise, the scores are usually close enough to the person's own perceptions of his or her behavior that the question doesn't come up.

However, it is useful to remember that any measuring device is, at best, only accurate in most instances. This person may be the exception. For this reason, it's always dangerous to proclaim (or to accept) instrument results as gospel truth. The results of any psychological instrument should be viewed as more data about the individual – to be compared with other data which he has about himself. It is a starting place to begin asking questions about oneself – to help put one's behavior into perspective.

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