

## 5 Types of Conflict Styles<sup>1</sup>

### What is The Thomas Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument

The TKI test is a self-report questionnaire designed to measure how one deals with interpersonal conflict; with conflict being defined as simply the condition in which two or more individual's concerns appear to be incompatible. It is important to not mistakenly associate conflict with fighting, blaming, name-calling etc.; such a perspective makes conflict sound like something that is automatically destructive and dangerous. By recognizing that conflict is simply a condition in which people's concerns appear to be incompatible, we can see how arguing in a disruptive or destructive manner is simply just one option for attempting to rectify an incompatibility issue (and is rarely an optimal solution).

The TKI instrument includes five different conflict-handling modes and helps you identify which of these modes you use most often. This information is often found helpful in both personal and work environments. According to Kenneth W. Thomas, the author of "Introduction to Conflict Management", surveys have shown how managers spend about a quarter of their time dealing with conflict. Whether it is handling disagreements over policies, enforcing rules, managing the inevitable friction and resentment that crops up between people or negotiating over resources. Having a resource like the TKI assessment can be a great asset in understanding your conflict management style (Thomas 2).

One of the TKI assessment's main goals is to help you become more aware of the choices you and others make in conflict situations. This knowledge, combined with tips included in your Thomas Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument report, provide tools for you to steer conflict situations in constructive directions.

The Thomas Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument begins by identifying the two basic dimensions of Conflict Behavior:

- *Assertiveness*: The degree to which you try to satisfy your own concerns during a conflict. This is related to how you might try to meet your needs or receive support for your ideas.
- *Cooperativeness*: The degree to which you try to satisfy the other individuals' concerns. It is related to how you might try to help the other individual meet his or her needs or how you can be receptive to the other individuals' ideas (Thomas 3-4).

The TKI assessment applies these to the five conflict-handling modes listed below. By applying the basic two dimensions of Assertiveness and Cooperativeness to the five

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<sup>1</sup> <https://careerassessmentsite.com/tests/thomas-kilmann-tki-tests/about-the-thomas-kilmann-conflict-mode-instrument-tki/>

conflict-handling modes, you create the five major combinations possible in a conflict situation.

- **Competing:** Is assertive and uncooperative. In this mode, you try to satisfy your own concerns at the other person's expense.
- **Collaborating:** Is both assertive and cooperative. In this mode, you try to find a win-win solution that completely satisfies the concerns of both individuals involved.
- **Compromising:** Is intermediate in both assertiveness and cooperativeness. In this mode, you try to find an acceptable solution that only partially satisfies both individual's concerns.
- **Avoiding:** Is both unassertive and uncooperative. In this mode, you work to sidestep the conflict without attempting to satisfy either individual's concerns.
- **Accommodating:** Is unassertive and cooperative. In this mode, you try to satisfy the other person's concerns at the expense of your own concerns.

These conflict-handling modes illustrate general intentions and not necessarily specific behaviors that you may enact in a conflict situation. For example, using the Avoiding conflict-handling mode, you may avoid a situation by physically evading the individual in question. Another option might include having verbal contact with the individual and stating that the conversation should be postponed until a later date (Thomas 5-6).

There is no single best way to handle every conflict. Each of the five conflict-handling modes has its own sets of benefits and costs. Each can be highly effective if used properly in the right circumstance. The key to successfully utilizing each conflict is based on knowing when to use each mode, and then having the skills to perform each mode well. The skill of your performance in each conflict-handling mode relies on your ability to recognize the benefits of a mode while also being able to minimize its cost.

The list of benefits and costs of each conflict-handling mode, along with related tips and feedback are as follows:

## #1 COMPETING

Kenneth W. Thomas notates the following benefits and costs of utilizing the Competing conflict-handling mode.

### *Benefits of Competing:*

- *Asserting Your Position:* Allows you to stand up for your ideas and interests while making sure that they are taken seriously.
- *Possibility of Quick Victory:* Allows you to make a quick recommendation and possibly press for a quick decision if you have enough power to be victorious.
- *Self-Defense:* Allows you to protect your interests and standpoints from attack.
- *Testing Assumptions:* Allows you to debate to expose and test your own and others' assumptions and views (Thomas 13).

### *Costs of Competing:*

- *Strained Work Relationships:* The loser of the conflict may feel resentful or exploited.
- *Suboptimal Decisions:* Rapid resolution can lead to possible win-win solutions being overlooked. Also, information is not exchanged freely in the Competing mode.
- *Decreased Initiative and Motivation:* When decisions are imposed, other individuals are less committed to them and show less initiative and motivation.
- *Possible Escalation and Deadlock:* It is possible there might be a temptation to use more extreme and provocative tactics if initial tactics fail. Can lead to negotiation deadlock (Thomas 14).

### **Related Feedback and Tips for When and How to Use The TKI Competing Mode**

#### ***When Should We Compete?***

Competing has a strong effect and it is best when used sparingly. While it may be necessary and useful in quite a few situations it also has the side effect of potentially imposing a significant cost on relationships and motivations and in its escalated form it can be quite destructive. Many people are quite sensitive to competing behavior and even a semi frequent use of this conflict management style can lead them to form negative opinions.

According to Thomas, utilizing the competing mode is most appropriate in conflicts over very important issues when collaborating fails or is simply not feasible and an assertive approach is required. There are times when you simply know that you are right. You may simply see an issue more clearly than others at times and when this issue is critical to the organization's (or individual's) welfare, it may be best if you argue your position as persuasively as possible. Other times a situation may require you to make an unpopular action, in which case you may need to use firmness to impose these decisions. Some examples of this may be enforcing budget cut backs and enacting disciplinary actions or ending an individual's employment. In some situations, such as in emergency situations, quick and decisive decisions need to be made and so having an individual with expertise or authority take control may be the best course of action. Other situations may include reacting when you are being attacked, stepping in to provide direction when consensus fails, or help move things along when people in a group are being too considerate, stalling progress when individuals accommodate one another purely out of politeness (Thomas 16-17).

#### **What Does Successful Competing Entail: Fight Fairly**

When competing it is helpful to work on specific behavioral skills in order to maximize the positive outcome and minimize the negative factors of utilizing this TKI conflict handling mode.

According to the writing of Thomas, working on being more persuasive is a great focus when competing as, when successful, it leads people to commit to your position based on its merit as opposed to simply complying to it because of force. By clearly explaining your intentions, working to appeal to shared concerns, and focusing on being specific and credible during your communication can lead to a much improved outcome while minimizing negative backlash. By avoiding exaggerations and sticking to the evidence, a positive overall outcome is much more likely (Thomas 17-18).

Thomas states that it is also important to work on making sure that you fight fairly. In the midst of a discussion it may be tempted to strengthen your position exaggeration, which should be avoided as it is likely to lessen your credibility now and on future issues. It can also be tempting to bring up conflict issues other than the one at hand, and this too should be avoided as it can imbue old emotional conflicts into the discussion (Thomas 18). Also, work on being respectful; avoid letting an unwillingness to wait lead to the inclusion of toxic and degrading behavior. You can also work on softening up your language, especially if you have a tendency to utilize demeaning language.

Finally, work on switching to using cautions instead of threats. Threats should be usually used as a last resort and with great care as they tend to do a great deal of damage of any standing goodwill and promote defiance, counter-threats, and retaliation. Thomas recommends that instead of utilizing threats, which is promising to provide punishment if another person does not comply with your wishes, work on utilizing warnings. As a striking contrast to threat, a warning illustrates what you will have to do if an individual does not do what you advise. In general warnings have a much different feel than threats and come off as more judicious and less capricious. Also, because they tend to provide an explanation of why your actions would be necessary, they tend to come off as more tenable than threats (Thomas 19).

## **#2 COLLABORATING**

Kenneth W. Thomas notes the following benefits and costs of utilizing the Collaborating conflict-handling mode.

### *Benefits of Collaborating:*

- *High-Quality Decisions:* Leads to seeking inventive solutions that are better than each person's initial positions.
- *Learning and Communication:* Aids communication and discovery through open exchange of information.
- *Resolution and Commitment:* Leads to both people working toward meeting all concerns, translating into both parties being committed to the decision.
- *Strengthening Relationships:* Builds trust and respect by resolving problems in a relationship (Thomas 13).

### *Costs of Collaborating:*

- *Time and Energy Required:* Requires full concentration and creativity. It also requires more time for digging through issues than the other modes.
- *Psychological Demands:* Can be psychologically demanding as both parties have to be open to new viewpoints, ideas, and challenges.
- *Possibility of Offending:* This mode may require working through some sensitive issues. You risk worsening the situation and potentially hurting another's feelings if unsuccessful.
- *Vulnerability Risk:* It is possible that others may try to exploit your flexibility and openness (Thomas 14).

### **Related Feedback and Tips for When and How to Use The TKI Collaborating Mode**

#### ***When is it Best to Collaborate?***

In his assessment of the Collaborating conflict handling mode Thomas states that Collaborating solutions are often highly desirable but are only realistically feasible when a situation meets very specific criteria. More than any other mode it requires ample time, participants to have strong interpersonal skills and trust for each other while being open to new ideas and the issue itself needs to have integrative possibilities. If one or more of these factors is missing, then collaboration is not likely to be a likely pathway for one to take effectively (Thomas 22-23).

It is advisable to reserve collaborating for only important issues. In many cases an issue may be considered significant, but that does not necessarily make it important. In cases such as this, using the Compromising mode is likely to produce an outcome that would be considered good enough without requiring the extensive time and resource commitment associated with collaboration.

The question then becomes, when is collaboration truly the best option? The added benefits of a win-win outcome are more valuable in some scenarios than others. One such scenario is when you want to learn, as collaborative discussions tend to be the most straightforward means of learning from other people. In this mode you are able to test your assumptions without the worry of your energy getting into defending your existing views as we find in competitive arguments. Thomas also emphasizes that this mode is also useful when dealing with complex issues that require for you to merge insight from people with diverse perspective. These individuals may be more challenging to manage because of the potential introduction of conflicting insight, but it also provides a way garnering a more complete understanding of the situation at hand from the diversity of specialized perspectives. The collaborative mode can also be a proper choice when working through problems in a relationship; business or personal. In any long term relationship unresolved issues can stack up as frustrations build up from past accommodations and compromises. In situations such as this collaborating can serve as a way to bring such issues to the surface so that the core problems in a relationship can be resolved (Thomas 23).

### ***What Does Successful Collaborating Entail: Engaging Others.***

When collaborating it is beneficial to focus on developing specific behavioral skills in order to maximize the positive outcome of this highly demanding TKI conflict handling mode.

A great place to start is working on setting the right tone when raising up conflict issues and doing it in such a way that doesn't come off as being competitive or create defensiveness. Before even beginning an attempt at a collaborative solution you should ask the other person if it is a good time to do it. You may be eager to raise the issue, but you will need to respect the other person's schedule if you are to hope for cooperation. Thomas recommends utilizing "we" language to help create a collaborative environment once timing is figured out as it helps avoid putting blame on the other person. It puts the focus on solving a joint problem that can be solved together. One of the ways to put yourself in a mode to use "we" language is to picture the other person's positive concerns. It also helps to focus on spelling out the positive outcomes that you can both achieve by solving the current problem while really emphasizing the specific concerns you think the other person has (Thomas 24).

The second, and most important step in collaborating is identifying other individual's underlying concerns. In order to do this successfully it is important to learn how to effectively focus on each person's concerns as opposed to their positions. The concerns in a conflict are what each person cares about and is inherently threatened by the conflict. Positions are the actions you propose to settle the specific conflict. If you jump to positions prematurely it can lead to a win-lose scenario based on disagreements over different positions where only one individual can win. By clarifying and sharing your underlying concern and then helping to clarify the other person's underlying concerns it can lead to a much better mutual understanding of each other's situations. This, in turn, is much more likely to lead to a collaborative resolution (Thomas 25).

Progressing to a position where both parties see the conflict as a mutual problem you can focus on brainstorming solutions that would satisfy both of your concerns. This does require that both parties remain flexible during the process while knowing when to be firm on about the most important concerns you both have. Once you have identified numerous solutions that could work for both parties it should be much easier to finally agree on the best solution for the issue at hand. Once all of these aspects are addressed it will be much easier to brainstorm proper solutions and then move to picking the one that will result in the best overall outcome for both parties (Thomas 26).

### **#3 COMPROMISING**

Kenneth W. Thomas notes the following benefits and costs of utilizing the Compromising conflict-handling mode.

#### *Benefits of Compromising:*

- *Pragmatism:* Often leads to a deal that is good enough without the necessary effort of trying to get both parties everything they wanted.
- *Speed and Expediency:* Allows you to settle on a conclusion quickly.
- *Fairness:* Creates resolutions that aim for equal gains and losses for both parties.
- *Maintaining Relationships:* Allows both parties to meet halfway and reduces strain on the relationship (Thomas 13).

#### *Costs of Compromising:*

- *Partially Sacrificed Concerns:* Since both individuals' concerns are compromised, it leaves some residual frustration. The issue isn't fully resolved and may flare up again.
- *Suboptimal Solutions:* Settling for Compromising decisions is of lower quality than successful collaborative decisions.
- *Superficial Understanding:* Agreements often gloss over differences with fuzzy statements that don't accurately mirror the beliefs of the individuals who disagree. (Thomas 14).

### **Related Feedback and Tips for When and How to Use The TKI Compromising Mode**

#### ***When is it Best to Compromise?***

Compromising solutions are often not the first go-to solution when dealing with conflict, but there are times that they are the most efficient and practical solutions to a problem. However, it is important to remember that compromising does require for both parties to partially sacrifice parts of their concerns. There are certain conflicts that involve concerns so vital that even a partial sacrifice is not an option and during those situations compromising will simply not be an option. Such options are best left for the collaborating or competing conflict-handling modes.

Compromising is best suited for issues that are of intermediate importance to you; important enough to matter, yet not critical. When choosing to utilize the compromising mode you should make sure that you both take turns bearing small costs. If either individual starts to provide numerous favors in a row it can lead to resentment and even disdain. Therefore, making sure that you return each other's favors in a comparable way is very important (Thomas 29).

Compromising is utilized in many cases when a collaborating or competing method is simply not a practical choice. There are a few scenarios where this may come up.

Sometimes the compromising conflict handling mode is utilized when a temporary solution to a more complex issue is required. There may be a better time to come up with a permanent solution using a different mode, but for the time being the compromising solution allows for work to continue. This mode is also used when two individuals with equal power are faced with a win-lose issue where collaboration is not working and the competing mode is unlikely to be effective. In other cases, one (or both) of the individuals realize that more assertive modes would harm a relationship and compromising can help avoid this harm (Thomas 30).

### ***What Does Successful Compromising Entail: Shifting from Competing to Compromising***

While working on becoming more efficient at using the compromising conflict mode you can benefit from developing specific behavioral skills.

One of the hardest behavior skills to develop properly is to transition smoothly from a competing mode to a compromising mode where you make partial concessions without giving away too much. Giving away too much may give the inadvertent side effect of looking weak. This is especially a problem if you begin to compromise while the other person is still competing. Using “we” language is a good tactic that can help emphasize the need for compromise without appearing weak. Once both parties are committed to compromising it is also important that your partial concessions are reciprocated. You may need to discuss a few different partial concession options before one can be agreed upon (Thomas 30-31).

*The second, and equality important aspect of compromising is being able to focus on fairness during the concession-making process. One of the best ways to do this is to insist on a criterion of fairness at the beginning of negotiations so that surprises don't pop up in the middle of negotiations, causing un-necessary toxicity. It is also highly beneficial to remain as objective as possible by utilizing neutral sources when collecting information. If this is handled properly then often times the application of the criterion that was agreed upon in advance will go much more smoothly, therefore helping you get the most out of the Compromising conflict handling mode (Thomas 30).*

### **#4 AVOIDING**

Kenneth W. Thomas notates the following benefits and costs of utilizing the Avoiding conflict-handling mode.

#### *Benefits of Avoiding:*

- *Reducing Stress:* This mode allows you to avoid exacting or displeasing people and topics.
- *Saving Time:* Allows you to not waste time and energy on low-priority items.
- *Steering Clear of Danger:* Allows you to avoid inciting trouble.



- *Setting Up More Favorable Conditions:* Provides you with time to be more prepared and less distracted so that you may deal with the matter at hand (Thomas 13).

### *Costs Of Avoiding:*

- *Declining Working Relationships:* Using this mode creates the possibility that work may not be accomplished as people avoid each other. This mode allows for hostile stereotypes to develop and putrefy.
- *Resentment:* Using this mode can lead to resentment from others whose concerns are being neglected, seeing your actions as shifty.
- *Delays:* Unaddressed issues cause delays and may keep recurring. This takes up more time and causes more aggravation than if these problems were addressed earlier.
- *Degrading Communication and Decision Making:* Using this mode may cause people to walk on eggshells as opposed to speak honestly and learn from one another (Thomas 14).

## **Related Feedback and Tips for When and How to Use The TKI Avoiding Mode**

### ***When is it Best to Avoid?***

The Avoiding conflict handling mode is technically a lose-lose mode where the decision is made to not pursue either your own or the other individual's concerns. This may sound like a universally negative mode, but it is important to note that there are certain situations where the Avoiding mode can be the right decision.

In general, it is best not to avoid other people. In social situations avoiding individuals can be done more easily but when dealing with business and family situations using the Avoiding conflict handling mode can bring along with it much larger consequences. In a professional environment there is an expectation of building and maintaining relationships and also putting up with certain irritations in order to accomplish your work tasks. With that being said, there are cases where the cost of interacting with certain individuals is too high and avoiding becomes necessary for your own welfare (Thomas 33).

According to Thomas, the Avoiding conflict handling mode is also appropriate if it leads you to avoid "emotional" conflicts. Emotional conflicts create defensiveness and hard feelings by personalizing the conflict. In order to avoid these forms of conflict you can start by avoiding issues of blame. Instead of focusing on who showed poor judgment or didn't do what they were supposed to, you can focus on how the process can be improved in order for future outcomes to be more successful. Controlling your anger is also very important as we tend to be righteous when angered and tend to overgeneralize or try to hurt or push the other person (Thomas 34).

Another appropriate use of the Avoiding mode comes up when little can be gained from a conflict. Examples of this are issues that are simply unimportant, are issues that others can handle, or issues that are symptoms of other issues. It is also a viable approach

when you assess that the issue is one you simply can't win or is too sensitive to address effectively (Thomas 34).

Another way of utilizing the Avoiding conflict mode is to postpone an issues temporarily in a strategic manner. Sometimes the most obvious time to use the Avoiding mode is when you need to find more time to handle a situation. If you are in the middle of a more important issue, then the right course of action is often to postpone dealing with the new issue. In other situations, you may simply need more time to gather information on an issue so that you don't make an immediate, but uninformed decision in a conflict situation. When dealing with complex or sensitive issues it is also a viable strategy to take a break in order to refocus so that you remain both mentally alert as well as emotionally centered when it is most needed (Thomas 34-35).

### ***What Does Successful Avoiding Entail: Differentiating between Avoiding and Evading***

Certain behavioral skills can be developed when improving the efficiency of the Avoiding Conflict handling mode. An important behavioral skill to develop is one's ability to use the Avoiding mode without coming off as evasive. Using the Avoiding conflict handling mode can come off as evasive when the reasoning for your choice to avoid a situation is not made clear. Regardless of your reasoning you are neglecting the other person's concerns, even if it is temporarily. In order to minimize the negative impact avoiding may cause it can be helpful to actively communicate the reason you are avoiding an issue and when you postpone a confrontation it can help to set a time for when the issue may be realistically addressed (Thomas 35-36).

Another important behavioral skill you can develop when dealing with the Avoiding mode is learning to decide what is important and what is not. It may sound like a simple concept but deciphering what is truly worth your limited time and energy can be tricky. For starters you will want to be clear about your goals heading into a meeting. If you do not have a clear goal, then it's possible the meeting is a waste of time. Focusing on reaching a shared agenda and then sticking to it while always being on the lookout for new information should be a goal. If those factors are not coming together then you might be looking at a situation that is not ready to be tackled (Thomas 35).

These are just some of the things to consider when utilizing the Avoiding conflict handling mode. While this mode is not always optimal, it definitely has its role when conditions are appropriate.

## **#5 ACCOMMODATING**

Kenneth W. Thomas notates the following benefits and costs of utilizing the Accommodating conflict-handling mode.

### *Benefits of Accommodating:*

- *Helping Someone Out:* Assisting others in meeting their needs by supporting them.
- *Restoring Harmony:* Can smooth feathers and settle troubled waters.
- *Building Relationships:* Can be used to build social capital by doing favors. Can also be used as a way of apologizing when necessary.
- *Choosing a Quick Ending:* This mode can be used to cut your losses as a way to minimize future losses in a hopeless situation (Thomas 13).

### *Costs of Accommodating:*

- *Sacrificed Concerns:* This mode entails conceding something you care about and so inevitably your views or interests are sacrificed.
- *Loss Of Respect:* This mode can build goodwill, but a perception of low assertiveness can lead to you losing respect from your peers. A pattern of accommodating can encourage others to exploit you.
- *Loss Of Motivation:* Using the Accommodating mode leads to less satisfaction. It can lead to you agreeing to things for which you have little excitement (Thomas 14).

## **Related Feedback and Tips for When and How to Use The TKI Accommodating Mode**

### **When is it Best to Accommodate?**

The Accommodating conflict handling mode can be an effective way of handling conflict in certain situations, but one needs to be careful not to overuse it otherwise it can lead to an unhealthy pattern of appeasement. Therefore, knowing when it is the correct choice is very important.

A simple and appropriate time to use the Accommodating mode can be when after making your case for your personal position and hearing the other person's position you simply decide that you are wrong or the other individual's position is better and stronger. At that point admitting that you are wrong is the better option in the long run (Thomas 39).

At other times you may make the case for your position and hear the the opposition, but realize that while you feel you are still right you also realize that you will still lose or be overruled regardless of what you say or do. In these cases, it might be better to concede gracefully and minimize the loss of goodwill from prolonging the argument (Thomas 39).

Thomas also writes that another way to utilize the Accommodating conflict handling mode is to accommodate when you realize that a small sacrifice on your part can do a much greater good for someone else. Whether it is simply doing someone a favor, boosting someone confidence, or encouraging development by allowing the other person to make decisions even if you have doubt. Accommodating can also be used as a way of

damage control as a way to repair damage you may have caused in a previous encounter by apologizing or making reparations (Thomas 39-40).

However, the Accommodating mode is not always a healthy choice. This mode should not be over used when dealing with individuals that are consistently emotionally out of control or verbally abusive. You may find that appeasing them can help diffuse the situation in the immediacy, but if left unchecked it can to a very unhealthy pattern that can encourage future instances of rage and threats (Thomas 41).

In order to get the most positive outcome out of using the Accommodating conflict handling mode you should work on developing specific behavioral skills.

According to Thomas, one of the most valuable skills to develop when using the Accommodating mode is learning to concede gracefully. The ability to not be a sore loser is a surefire way to earn respect. Don't complain; instead take the high road as acting out will only lead others to view you in a more negative light. It is also helpful to learn how to effectively explain your motives when accommodating so that your actions are not misinterpreted as signs that you do not care about the issue at hand (Thomas 40).

Another skill set to develop is the ability to plant the seeds of your concerns in situations where your position will not be successful in the short term. Focusing on the long term plan can lead you to slowly make progress that will garner you more support for your position over time.

The final skill set you can develop is learning how to satisfy a complaint. Complaints can often provide feedback that can help performance, but how you react makes a very big difference on the outcome. It is reasonable to accept anger as it often accompanies complaints, but there is a fine line between accepting anger and accepting abuse. By allowing the other individuals to express themselves without being defensive or counterattacking allows the other individual to have their feelings heard and can often lead to the situation calming down until it can be discussed more reasonably. Explaining what happened without attempting to overly defend what happened can also help. By using active listening, apologizing, and making reparations when appropriate you are much more likely to have a constructive outcome to the encounter (Thomas 41).

Learning when to use the Accommodating mode appropriately without allowing it to be a crutch can be a powerful part of your conflict handling toolset.