Mastering the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument
— TKI —

Celebrating More Than 50 Years of

Resolving All Kinds of Conflicts

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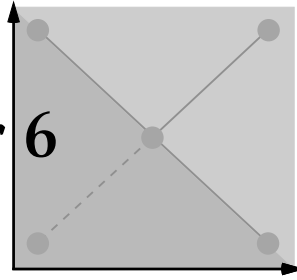
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Chapter 6

Taking the TKI Assessment Tool with Either the Standard or Modified Instructions

In the early 1970s, Ken and I created the standard TKI instructions that are still printed on every TKI paper booklet and are also shown on your computer or mobile screen (whenever you take the online version of the TKI assessment tool):

> **Consider situations in which you find your wishes differing from those of another person. How do you usually respond to such situations?**

The respondent is then shown 30 A/B pairs of statements that describe various behavioral responses to any interpersonal conflict. For each pair of A/B choices, the respondent is asked to select either the A or B choice based on which statement best characterizes their behavior—which is depicted by those five conflict-handling modes: collaborating, competing, compromising, avoiding, accommodating. After the person completes responses to all items on the instrument,

the results reveal which conflict modes that person might be using too much or too little, as compared to a large normative sample.

It's important to re-emphasize this main point: ***Respondents to the TKI are NOT presented with any interpersonal situation.*** Instead, respondents are asked to provide their typical responses to conflict across ALL situations. In fact, when a trainer or facilitator provides the TKI's standard instructions in a college classroom or a corporate training program, there is always a person in the audience who asks this typical question: "Since I address conflict differently depending if I'm at home or at work, which setting should I keep in mind while responding to the items on this instrument?"

In response to that popular question, the trainer or facilitator is expected to provide this standardized answer: "Don't think of any particular situation when you respond to each of the 30 A/B items on the TKI: Just provide your *typical* response, your *average* response to conflict, across all the situations in your life."

By 1974, just before the TKI was officially published, Ken and I already knew that a few people had some difficulty with taking the TKI by mentally "averaging" their typical response to interpersonal conflicts across all possible situations, rather than focusing entirely on their conflict-handling behavior in the workplace or focusing on their behavior in their home with family or friends, or in some other specified social setting. But despite this dilemma, we still decided to word the standard TKI instructions to illicit the typical (or average) behavioral response that a person has to conflict in general, since our exclusive use of the TKI at that time (as young assistant professors) was for teaching graduate students who were either unemployed or held jobs in altogether different organizations.

MODIFYING THE STANDARD TKI INSTRUCTIONS
FOR A SPECIFIC CONFLICT SITUATION

Toward the late 1970s, I began conducting management training workshops and consulting programs INSIDE various organizations. Not surprisingly, I made extensive use of the TKI assessment, since almost everyone needed to become more comfortable with conflict and also learn how to manage workplace conflict more effectively.

I don't recall exactly when I first tried modifying the TKI for a given situation, but I began modifying the standard instructions on the TKI so people's responses would exclusively be focused on how conflicts were being managed INSIDE their organization. So rather than using the standard instructions (which ask people to think of ALL situations in general), I began asking participants to respond to the TKI's 30 A/B items along these lines:

> **In this organization, in this group, or in this department …
> how do you usually respond when you find your wishes
> differing from those of other members?**

When I MODIFIED the standard instructions in this manner, respondents never again asked me if they should respond to the TKI in terms of their conflict experiences at home or at work. I had now provided them with a particular situation that they could easily keep straight in their mind—as they responded to all 30 A/B items on the TKI assessment tool.

USING TWO TKI ASSESSMENTS PER PERSON
WITH MODIFIED INSTRUCTIONS

After having modified the standard TKI instructions for many organizations in the 1970s and 1980s, by the early 1990s, I thought it might be interesting to ask each person to take TWO TKIs, each with different modified instructions. This approach seemed radical at the time, but revealed some valuable information that one TKI, by itself, could never provide. To make a long story short, whenever I deliver management training programs or consulting services to any group or organization, *(1) I ask the members to take their first TKI with the mindset of INSIDE their group, department, or organization (however they decide to focus on conflict in the workplace), and then, directly afterwards, (2) I ask those same members to take their second TKI with the perspective of OUTSIDE their group (meaning, how they typically respond to conflicts in all other settings of their life, excluding their current group).*

Essentially, that second TKI expects respondents to reveal their typical approach to conflict across all those *other* situations, which necessarily includes conflicts with their family members, neighbors, friends, other organizations, and so forth.

In sharp contrast to the OUTSIDE perspective, when members focus on their conflict-handling behavior INSIDE their group, team, or organization, there are numerous systems and processes in their organization that expect or actually require members to use certain conflict modes more than others, as opposed to what modes those members typically use across all the *other* settings in their life.

What did I learn from having members take two TKIs with modified instructions for (1) INSIDE their group or organization and (2) OUTSIDE their group or organization? Figure 6.1 provides one way of answering that question: Here we see an abridged organization chart with the senior executives at the very top of the hierarchy (i.e., the pyramid), the next level of managers directly below, followed by the next level

of managers or non-supervisory personnel, and so on. Even though large organizations have several more levels, divisions, and groups, this organization chart is sufficient for our purposes.

FIGURE 6.1
AN ORGANIZATION'S INSIDE TKI RESULTS
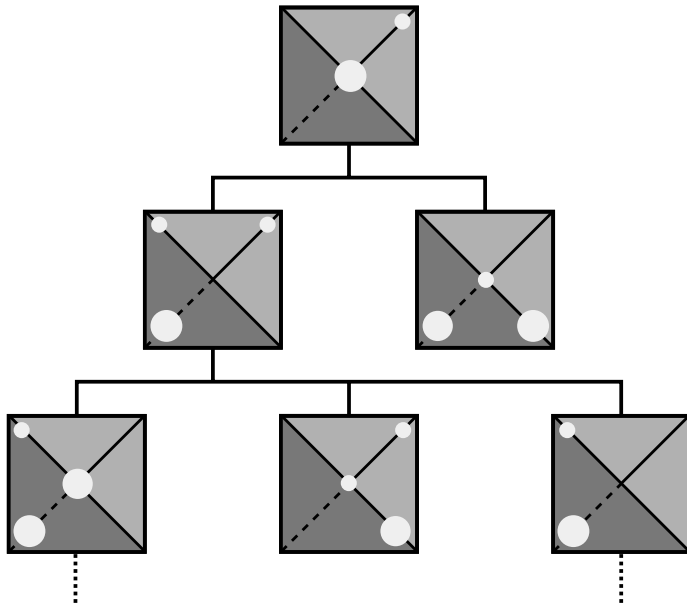
The above figure shows the symbolic organization chart from the INSIDE perspective, which is developed from member responses to their first TKI for INSIDE the group, department, or organization.

As you can see, I have found it most informative to replace each box on the organization chart (representing a division, department, or work group) with the TKI Conflict Model, which also graphically displays the conflict modes that were in or near the HIGH percentile category, as indicated by the large circles that are inside each box on the chart. Each box also highlights the conflict modes that landed in

or near the LOW percentile category, as shown by the much smaller circles on the TKI Conflict Model. For simplicity's sake, however, the conflict modes that fell into the MEDIUM percentile category aren't identified with any symbol as such. Instead, focusing primarily on the conflict modes that each group or department is possibly using too much or too little will provide the most useful information in a visually clear-cut manner.

On this organization chart, observe that the senior executives on top of the hierarchy are heavily using the compromising mode, which is moderate in assertiveness; meanwhile, the next two levels are mostly using the avoiding and accommodating conflict modes, which are the LEAST assertive modes. ***What is displayed on this chart is, in fact, a rather common result, revealing the overuse of avoiding and accommodating as we move farther down the hierarchy.*** In fact, it is not unusual to discover that the senior executives at the top of the hierarchy use largely competing, compromising, and collaborating to address their conflicts INSIDE the organization, while members at the bottom of the hierarchy often use the avoiding mode and the accommodating mode to comply with their bosses above them.

On Figure 6.2, the TKI results that are shown on each box on the organization chart captures the OUTSIDE perspective, meaning that these results were from members' responses to their SECOND TKI, using modified instructions to measure their conflict-handling behavior OUTSIDE their group, department, or organization. As can be seen on this chart, the more assertive modes are frequently being used OUTSIDE the organization, and, most enlightening, ***this same pattern of conflict-handling behavior emerges up and down the hierarchy and a similar pattern is revealed when we look across the departments and groups at the same level in the organization.*** Said different, every box on the chart shows that members are fairly assertive when they approach a conflict OUTSIDE the work setting, as indicated by the

large circles for competing, collaborating, and compromising across the entire organization chart.
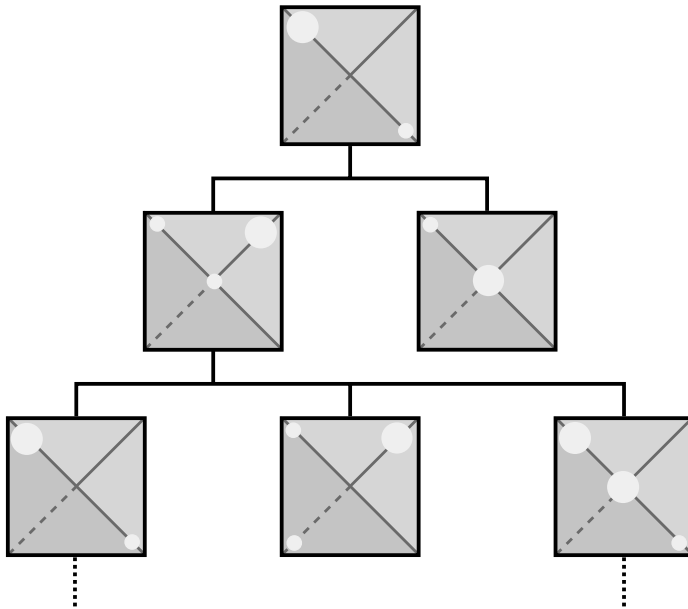
Now take a look—back and forth—between the INSIDE and OUTSIDE perspective, as vividly portrayed by the two organization charts shown in Figure 6.3. Occasionally, the INSIDE and OUTSIDE charts are quite similar. But most of the time, it's clear that the two charts are noticeably different, which indicates that *the avoiding and accommodating modes are being used relatively more frequently INSIDE the organization, particularly as you move from the senior executive level down the hierarchy to the frontline employees at the bottom of the chart.*

Figure 6.3
Comparing the INSIDE and OUTSIDE TKI Results
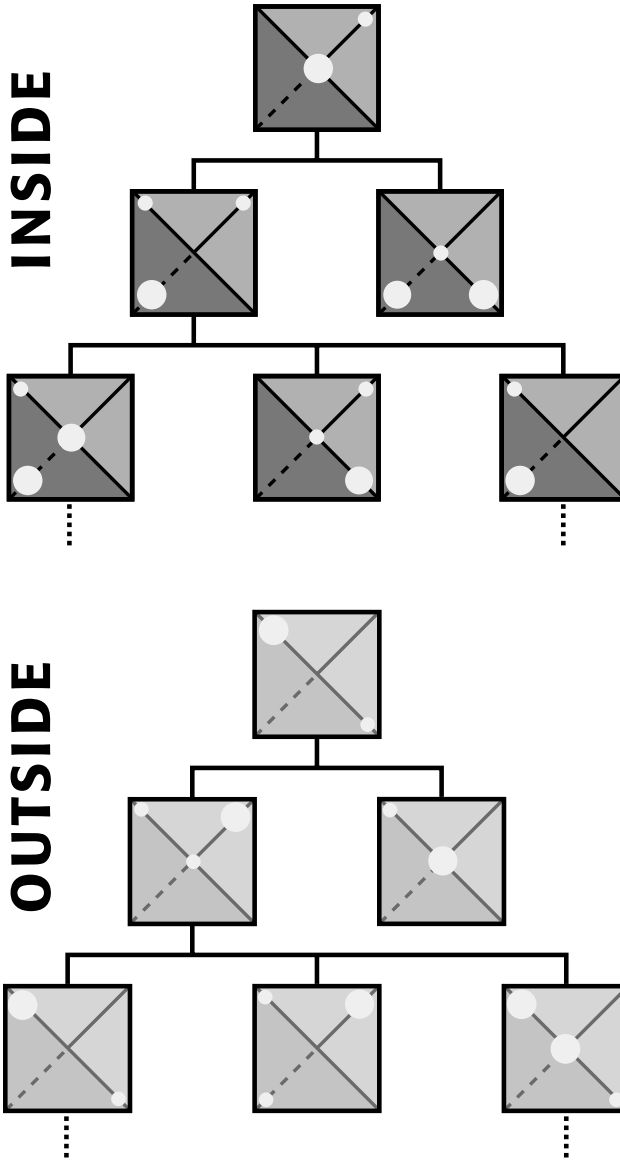
But now, I must confess: Although it's very easy to suggest the *probable* causes of any significant discrepancies between the INSIDE and OUTSIDE perspective (including the organization's culture, its strategy and structures, its reward system, and its business processes, all of which are known as an organization's systems and processes), technically speaking, such *probable causes* of any major differences between the INSIDE and OUTSIDE organization charts are only an educated guess—based on my extensive background from studying and consulting for organizations. The two TKI assessments are only assessing the relative use of the five conflict modes—both INSIDE and OUTSIDE a group or organization. Let me be crystal clear: *The TKI only assesses conflict-handling behavior. That is all! The TKI does NOT measure anything that pertains to an organization's systems and processes, let alone what impact each one of those systems and processes might be having on conflict-handling behavior.*

Even if the organization's culture, strategy and structure, reward system, and its leadership behavior are the principle causes for any significant differences between the INSIDE and OUTSIDE charts, we still don't know the *relative* impact of an organization's systems and processes. Do these particular features of an organization have equal influence in changing members' conflict-handling behavior? Or is the culture the primary culprit? Or is it the reward system that encourages members to use some modes more than others? Or are members more likely to rely on avoiding and accommodating at the lower levels in the organization—in response to their very assertive, autocratic leaders?

Even when each member responds to two TKI assessments, it's still only a good guess as to which particular systems and processes are causing them to use different modes to address their workplace conflicts, which might not be very effective or desirable. As such, to stop guessing as to why people are approaching conflict differently, whether they focus on INSIDE or OUTSIDE their organization, *we have to find a way to assess the impact of systems and processes directly*

and explicitly. Improving how conflict is approached and then resolved in the workplace must be based on an accurate understanding of which SPECIFIC systems create the eight attributes of a situation that govern when to use each conflict mode effectively and efficiently.

It' is so important that you understand this key point: It takes revitalized and aligned systems and processes for members to use all five conflict modes effectively—depending on the key attributes of the situation. Members must then be able to use each of those five modes, as needed, while addressing all their remaining business, technical, and management conflicts.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has extended the original application of the TKI assessment tool by suggesting how its standard instructions can be modified to focus on one context—and one context only—thereby using the TKI to assess conflict-handling behavior in a given group, organization, or other social setting (a family or a community). We also extended the initial use of the TKI by having members take two assessments: the first TKI is for INSIDE their organization while the second TKI is for OUTSIDE their organization.

The next chapter discusses the *Kilmann Organizational Conflict Instrument* (Kilmann, 2020), which was developed to assess what the TKI cannot assess all on its own: to enable organizations to identify their specific "system conflicts" so they can be effectively resolved in order to achieve long-term organizational success.