

16 Tips for Using the TKI[®] Tool

**for Developing People and
Facilitating Conflict Management**

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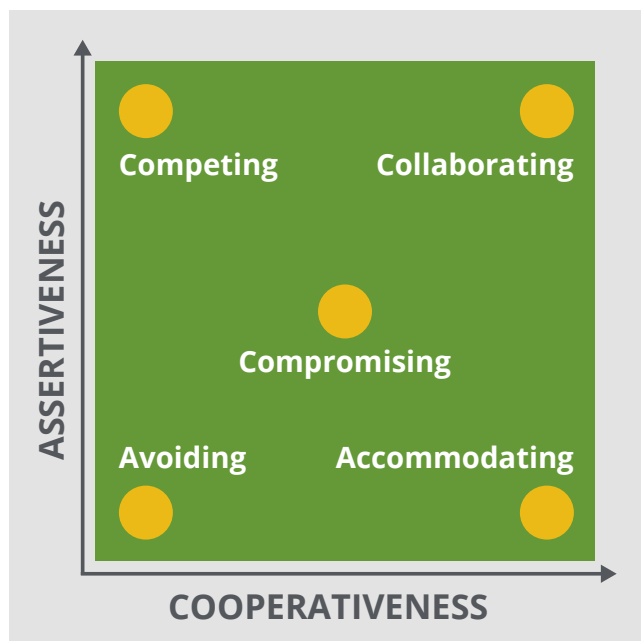
Author's Note

The first draft of the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI®) was created in early 1971 at the University of California, Los Angeles. In UCLA's Graduate School of Management, Ken Thomas was a young assistant professor, and I was an even younger doctoral student. After several rounds of data collection—which allowed us to fine-tune the instructions, the 30 items, and the accompanying interpretive materials—the TKI instrument was ready for publication. For the next five decades, I continued using it in my research, teaching, and consulting projects, which allowed me to learn more and more about conflict management.

All you need to know to start is that the TKI assessment measures the relative frequency with which you use five modes of behavior—competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding, and accommodating—in a conflict situation. After taking the assessment, you become aware that you've been using, out of habit, one or more modes too much and one or more modes too little. By learning how to purposely choose the right mode for a given situation, more of your needs, and other people's needs, can be met.

Through these 16 tips, you'll become more aware of some fascinating nuances about using and interpreting the TKI assessment.

Good and bad avoiding



Let's start with the avoiding mode, which is positioned at the very bottom-left corner of the TKI Conflict Model. Avoiding represents the combination of low assertiveness and low cooperativeness—neither attempting to satisfy your own needs nor attempting to satisfy the other person's needs. But an important distinction is to be made between good avoiding and bad avoiding (also referred to as effective avoiding and ineffective avoiding, respectively).

Good avoiding is when you purposely leave a conflict situation in order to collect more information, wait for tempers to calm down, or conclude that what you first thought was a vital issue isn't that important after all.

Bad avoiding, however, is when the topic is very important to both you and the other people involved in the conflict (and to the organization) but you aren't comfortable with confronting them. Instead, you're inclined to sacrifice your needs and their needs—which undermines your self-esteem, leaves you perpetually dissatisfied, and prevents you from helping the others.

Tip #1

Only avoid when that approach to conflict serves to truly benefit you as well as others—whether in the short term or long term. But don't avoid people or

situations simply because you don't like conflict or are reluctant to receive what you need and deserve. With awareness and practice, combined with assertiveness and cooperativeness, you can easily learn to get both your needs and other people's needs met—for all the right reasons.

How to use (and not just choose) a conflict mode

Even if you choose to avoid for the right reasons, what you actually say to people just before you withdraw from the situation does make a difference. Different people handle it in different ways. One person might avoid a conflict by expressing themselves this way: "I've had enough of this nonsense! I'm not going to waste any more of my time. I'm out of here." Another person may take this approach: "I've just realized I need more time to think about this topic and discuss these issues with my colleagues. I'm feeling a bit overwhelmed. Let's set up another meeting for next week. By then, I'll be ready to address the matter."

The person in the first instance of avoiding would probably come across as insensitive, condescending, and even demeaning. Because of the manner in which they left the situation, the other people involved might feel hurt or abandoned.

The person in the second instance shows regard for the other people in the conflict situation. Although they are still withdrawing, it's more likely that everyone concerned will have an easier time understanding and accepting their avoiding behavior because the reasons for it have been explained to them.

Essentially, which conflict mode you choose and how you then use it are two very different things!

Let's consider the same principle applied to collaborating. One person may choose to express their desire for collaboration this way: "We have to discuss these issues! You have no choice! I'm tired of superficial solutions that aren't based on our joint needs. If you don't sit down and share your deepest concerns with me, I'll no longer support your priorities in the workplace."

Another person may express themselves like this: “I really need your help. I’ve been very frustrated with our previous decisions, which haven’t seemed to address our most important needs. I’d like to share with you what matters most to me. And then, if you are willing, I’d really like to hear your most important concerns. Maybe we can figure out how to change the situation for both our sakes. Let’s give it a try.”

Based on basic TKI definitions, both individuals are using the collaborating mode. In the first instance, the attempt to collaborate will probably come across as bullying. Perhaps this is not the best way to elicit an open and candid dialogue about important and complex issues. In the second instance, the attempt to collaborate is more inviting—one that will likely engender mutual respect and a genuine exchange of ideas.

In the end, the second approach will lead to a more creative solution, while the first approach will put the other people on the defensive and shut down a conversation that is sorely needed.

Tip #2

Choosing a mode wisely and using that mode in the most constructive way possible will go far in producing the best resolution possible—rather than generating bad feelings and a disappointing outcome.

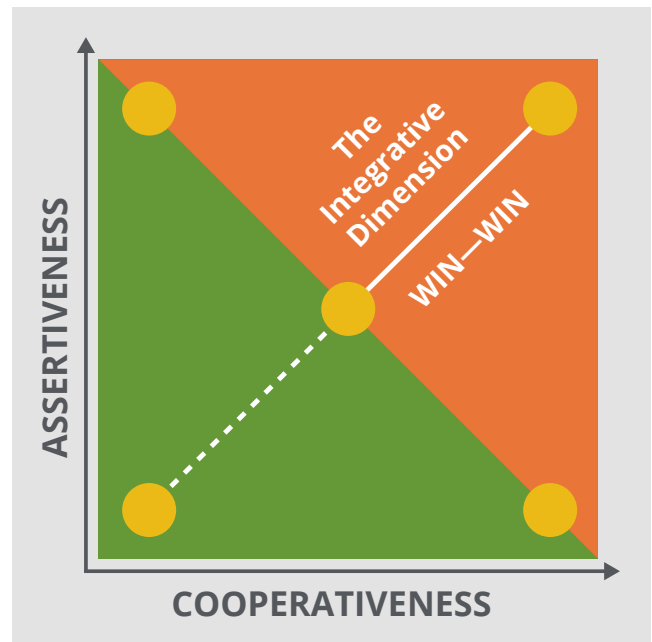
Collaborating: the most complex and least understood mode

The collaborating mode is positioned at the upper-right corner of the TKI Conflict Model along the integrative dimension. Even though this mode sounds ideal to most people, because it promises a win-win outcome, it can be used successfully only under the right conditions. In fact, there are more conditions that determine whether the collaborating mode will achieve its potential than is the case with any other conflict mode.

To begin with, when people are faced with overwhelming stress, they don’t have the mental clarity to engage in a productive dialogue about each other’s underlying concerns. As a result, they tend to find one of the other modes more suited to the high-pressure situation. Only if the stress is stimulating, inviting, and manageable

can the collaborating mode possibly result in a win-win outcome.

Moreover, overwhelming stress often creates the impression that there is so much to do in so little time.



With collaborating, however, it takes time for people to explore and then express what they really want and need.

Thus, only use collaborating when you have the time (or can take the time) for an engaging conversation.

If the apparent incompatibility between people is unidimensional—such as a tug of war between the union and management concerning whether the hourly wage should be \$12 or \$16—using the collaborating mode may be a big waste of time. The whole debate will surely hinge on whether one wage is more deserved, versus cost—effective, than another (somewhere between the \$12 and \$16 rate). In the end, one position will be chosen over the other (with competing and accommodating) or an in-between solution will partially satisfy each party (with compromising).

Yet, if the single issue in a proposed wage agreement can be expanded into something multidimensional—to include, for example, working conditions, flexible work time, participation in the decision-making process, and greater opportunities for taking educational



programs—using the collaborating mode has the best chance to create a fully satisfying package for all concerned. An hourly wage on the economical side of the debate—say, \$13 an hour—may be more than compensated, in the union’s eyes, by a specific and enforceable plan to improve the quality of work life, which has features that mean a lot to the workers. A creative package of both intrinsic and extrinsic rewards, due to its multidimensional nature, can therefore result in a win-win agreement between the union and management.

Because collaborating requires an open, candid, and creative exchange among people whose needs at first appear to be incompatible, the relationships between them must be based on trust, which must also be supported by a corporate culture that encourages the same.

Moreover, the organization’s reward system must have a history of rewarding people for expressing their real concerns as opposed to a legacy of critical incidents where employees have learned that people who had challenged the status quo later received a poor performance review—or even an abrupt dismissal. Using the collaborating mode can be personally dangerous if it is not based on a trustworthy culture and reward system.

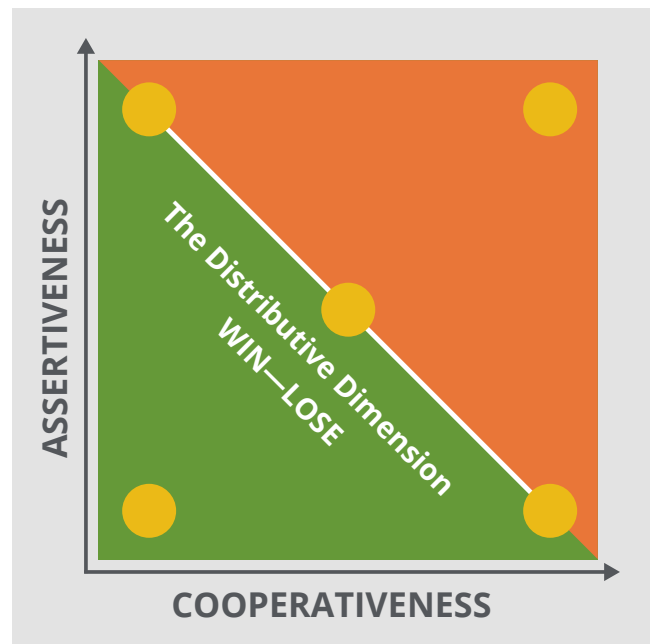
Furthermore, as I mentioned earlier, to use collaborating effectively, people must communicate, verbally and nonverbally, in ways that fully respect and honor one another.

However, if people don’t have the interpersonal skills to discuss differences in a manner that does not produce defensiveness, any attempt at collaborating will likely fail. Especially since full use of this mode may require people to share their innermost feelings with one another (and actively listen when others are sharing theirs), a higher level of interpersonal skills is needed with collaborating than with any of the other conflict modes.

 **Tip #3**

Although traveling up the integrative dimension to the collaborating mode has the potential to fully satisfy all persons involved in a conflict, it is important to understand when and under what conditions this ideal-sounding mode has the best chance to realize its promise—win-win for all.

Competing, accommodating, and compromising



Since my first two tips addressed the avoiding and collaborating modes, this section will examine the common ingredient of the three remaining modes. Specifically, competing, accommodating, and compromising all fall on the distributive dimension—the diagonal from the upper-left corner to the lower-right corner on the TKI Conflict Model.

Competing is assertive and uncooperative: I get my needs met, but you don't get your needs met. Accommodating is just the opposite—unassertive and cooperative: You get your needs met, but I don't get my needs met. Compromising is in the middle: We each get some of what we want, but we both remain unfulfilled in other ways.

The common feature with these three modes is their zero-sum, win-lose nature: The more you get, the less I get (and vice versa), since the size of the pie is fixed. Essentially, we slide up and down the distributive dimension, deciding how to distribute the available pieces of that fixed pie.

In mathematical terms, competing is when I get 100% of the pie and you get 0%. Accommodating is when you get 100% and I get 0%. Compromising, in its pure form, is when we each get 50% of the pie. But the total of what both of us receive from our resolution always adds up to 100%.

As usual, each conflict mode is only effective under a given set of conditions. Competing works best when the topic is much more important to me than it is to you. Accommodating is just the opposite. And if the topic is only somewhat important to both of us (and we don't have a lot of time to discuss it anyway), we might as well divide up the pie in equal portions and move on to other topics.

The danger of these conflict modes on the distributive dimension, however, is when a person's two or three highest modes on the TKI profile are some combination of competing, accommodating, and compromising (while the other modes are assessed as medium or low). In this case, the person can see only their work life and personal life in win-lose, zero-sum terms.

Virtually every conflict becomes a tug of war on the distributive dimension.

And since the other modes are much lower in usage, the person doesn't see the larger arena that could be created by broadening the topic and

thus expanding the size of the pie (as is possible with collaborating, as discussed earlier).

With TKI assessments, I often find that a significant number of people are blindly stuck on the distributive dimension and, therefore, are: (1) fully satisfied in some ways but losing coworkers, friends, and lovers in the process; (2) serving other people's needs but rather dissatisfied and unhappy themselves; or (3) partially satisfied but also feeling unfulfilled and empty the rest of the time.

Tip #4

Once a person becomes aware of their behavioral patterns, as revealed by their two or three highest versus lowest percentile modes, that awareness can then lead to dramatic behavioral change with training, patience, and practice. Sometime later (maybe a few weeks or a few months), a subsequent TKI assessment will reveal a more balanced profile with lower scores on competing, accommodating, and compromising and higher scores on collaborating and avoiding. Now the person has equal access to all five modes, depending on everyone's needs and the key attributes of the situation.

Distinguishing between accommodating and avoiding

People often ask me to spell out the difference between accommodating and avoiding. Or, as some say, "Isn't accommodating also an easy way to avoid, since you can quickly remove yourself from the situation by giving in to the other person? What's the difference?"

The key distinction for me is to assess whose needs get met, and to what extent, as a result of using a particular conflict mode. In particular, if your behavior results in the other person getting their needs met while you don't, that's an unambiguous definition of accommodating (high in cooperativeness and low in assertiveness). True, you may quickly escape the situation after you let the other



person have their way, but the fact is that the other person did get what they wanted.

However, if you behave in a way that prevents both of you from getting your needs met, which may or may not be the best approach in that situation, your conflict mode is defined as avoiding (low in both assertiveness and cooperativeness).

By making this distinction between different possible outcomes of the conflict (regarding whose needs got met and to what extent), it's easiest to sort out the five modes—clearly easier than making the more complex argument that you can remove yourself from a situation by accommodating, compromising, or competing. In the latter case, strangely enough, if you know that competitive behavior will turn the other person off and thus allow you to avoid the situation by competing, you could view competing as an avoidance strategy. But, again, I find it more straightforward and convenient to say that competing is evident when you get all of your needs met (high in assertiveness for you) and the other person gets none of their needs met (high in cooperativeness for him).

Tip #5

In essence, I am distinguishing between—and prioritizing—such concepts as intention, behavior, and outcome, and suggesting that each of these “perspectives” can lead to a slightly different interpretation of which conflict mode is being used and for what purpose. Intention is often elusive in the mind of the actor (whether conscious or not). Indeed, sometimes the intention is justified or rationalized only after the encounter has taken place. Sometimes, in fact, people don't know their intention until they've had time to think about their motives.

Behavior is subject to different interpretations, especially when complex, sequential strategies are involved. But when each person in the situation can be asked, after the fact, to what extent their needs have been met, it is more obvious which modes have had the ultimate impact on the outcome of that conflict situation.



Distinguishing between compromising and collaborating

People often ask me to clarify the difference between compromising and collaborating, especially since these two modes involve both people getting their needs met. In particular, people often use the word compromise to indicate that they have completely resolved the matter at hand: “We achieved a successful compromise!”

The key distinction, once again, concerns whose needs get met, and to what extent, as a result of using a particular conflict mode. Compromising means that each person gets partially satisfied but not completely satisfied. As noted in an earlier section, I think of compromising as a 50/50 split, in which each person gets a reasonable share of the available pie. But a compromise could also be a 75/25 split, where one person gets more than the other, but both people still get less than all their needs met. But notice that both a 50/50 and a 75/25 split still add up to 100—a zero-sum game along the distributive dimension. The more one gets, the less the other gets.

As defined by the TKI Conflict Model, however, collaborating means that both persons get all their needs met along the integrative dimension. How is this possible?

 **Tip #6**

By using the collaborating mode under the right conditions—such as making the conflict more complex in order to expand the size of the pie available to both persons, maintaining trust among participants, speaking and listening with sensitivity and empathy, and so forth— it’s possible to achieve total need satisfaction for both of them. With synergy, coming up with a creative solution that uniquely satisfies everyone’s needs, we thus achieve a 100/100 resolution instead of a 50/50 split.

Here is a simple example to make a very important point. Let’s say that two managers are discussing when to get together for a work meeting. Bob wants to meet at 8:00 a.m. because he’s most alert at that time, while Eduardo wants to meet at 4:00 p.m., for the same reason. By compromising, they might split the difference and meet at noon. This solution, while workable, does not satisfy either person very well.

Using the same example, let’s consider how the collaborating mode results in a very different outcome. Eduardo tells Bob that it’s most important for them to clarify the strategic goals of their business unit—a topic that Bob has put aside, with one excuse or another, for quite some time. Eduardo also suggests that they meet at his home in the late afternoon, since he would love to arrange a festive Mexican dinner as part of their meeting. Since Bob loves Mexican food and is eager to meet away from the stresses of the workplace, he’s happy to have the meeting at 4:00 p.m. at Eduardo’s place. In addition, Bob knows the topic of the meeting is something that must be addressed sooner or later. By discussing it outside the work environment, they might be able to develop a creative solution to their long-standing strategic conflict.

As a result of each person sharing more about their needs and wants (which makes the initial conflict more complex), the size of the pie has been greatly expanded, which makes a creative solution possible.

The meeting does in fact take place at 4:00 p.m. as Eduardo initially preferred, but the timing of the meet-

ing is now the least important aspect! Indeed, the late afternoon meeting at Eduardo’s allows both of them to relax and continue their discussion on a difficult subject over dinner, and also gives them the time and space to discuss their other differences. Collaborating is thus quite different from a quick attempt at giving both parties only something of what they really want.

 **Tip #7**

Try an experiential exercise to dramatize the five modes

Several decades ago I developed an experiential exercise for classroom and workshop settings in order to accelerate people’s understanding and internalization of the five modes. First I assess the conflict modes of 20 to 50 participants, without scoring their results, so they won’t see their high or low modes. For the moment, all they get to know are these five codes: C1, C2, C3, A1, and A2 (for competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding, and accommodating, respectively).

Then I form the community into five groups based on those codes by noting which individuals have the highest mode score in each category. Since people can have more than one mode in the top 25th percentile, I arbitrarily distribute the tied assignments in order to balance the size of the five groups.

Next, I have each group go through one of the classic experiential exercises developed and/or inspired by Jay Hall: “Lost on the Moon,” “Lost at Sea,” “Desert Survival,” and the like. Basically, group members first rank-order fifteen items that survived the calamity in the order of each item’s importance for success—such as reaching the mother ship after crash landing on the moon. Then the group discusses the different rankings and underlying beliefs of its members, thus having to resolve its conflicts one way or another. In essence, each group has to develop an agreed-upon group ranking of those same fifteen items by, essentially, using one or more conflict modes.

When the groups have completed this assignment, the facilitator provides the “right answer” for the rankings, which is based on the wisdom and experience of noted experts in the survival field. Having a “right answer” affords some very interesting calculations:



1. Which individual ranking in each group was initially closest to the expert ranking before the group discussion began, representing the most knowledgeable member?
2. What is the average ranking of the individuals in each group, representing the modal wisdom in the group before any group discussion took place?
3. How close did each group ranking get to the expert ranking in these respects? Was the group's ranking better or worse than the group's mathematical average of individual rankings—that is, did the group get closer to the right answer during its discussion, or did it get worse? And was the group's ranking better or worse than its best member's ranking—that is, did the group develop a synergistic ranking that was even closer to the expert's than its most knowledgeable member?

While I could spend more time discussing the many implications of these quantitative comparisons, suffice it to say that each group uses one conflict mode to resolve its differences to the outright exclusion of the other four modes, simply because it was initially formed by including only those members whose TKI scores were in the high 25% of that particular mode.

In the competing group, the members attempt to get their group to rank those same fifteen items as close to their own prior ranking as possible, rather than trying to develop a group ranking that is closest to the expert's ranking. Self-interest takes over when a

group is dominated by high assertiveness and low cooperativeness.

The collaborating group incessantly discusses what is behind each person's view on each of the fifteen survival items, even though several of these items are ranked at the bottom of the heap and thus are unimportant in surviving the ordeal. Having to satisfy everyone completely dominates the group's attention, regardless of the limited time available for discussion.

The compromising group merely votes on each item or uses a calculator to develop a mathematical average—much like what is done later to measure each group's success beyond that very average! For this compromising group, here is the unstated, shared belief: "Why discuss a topic when an easier and quicker method is available to develop a group ranking of those fifteen items?"

The avoiding group spends most of its time on other topics, such as the previous night's football or basketball game.

And members of the accommodating group repeatedly say to one another: "If you think that item should be #1 [and so forth], that's fine with me. I don't mind."

It never fails to amaze me how powerfully this TKI exercise demonstrates the way the conflict modes work, because the concentration of the high mode in each group serves to magnify that conflict-handling behavior to the extreme, due to the power of group dynamics.

The transition from TKI® assessments to effective behavior

The immediate benefit of taking the TKI assessment and reviewing your results (which includes a personalized report with the online version of the assessment) is awareness. You learn which conflict modes you might be using too much, usually out of habit, and which ones you might be using too little—since you've not been exposed to the many positive uses of your underutilized modes.

Tip #8

Although gaining awareness is the decisive **Step 1**, four additional steps must be taken to improve how you actually behave in conflict situations so you and other people will be more satisfied and your organization will be more successful.

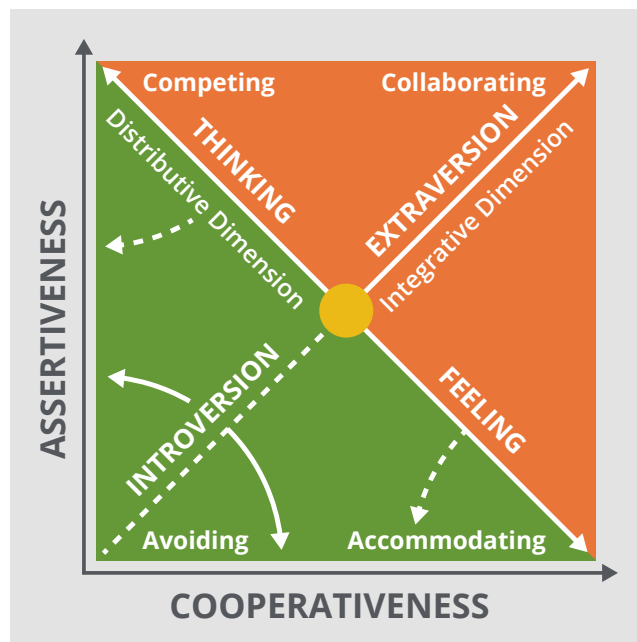
Step 2 is sharing your TKI results in a small group (family members or work associates) and hearing what others have to say about their results as well as how they experience your behavior in conflict situations. So long as the discussion remains supportive and is backed by a healthy culture, you will gain additional awareness as well as receive specific feedback about how you use one or more modes in different situations.

Step 3 is to learn the key attributes of a conflict situation that determine which modes work best under which conditions. As I've alluded to earlier, this step is learning to assess a situation in these terms: (a) the level of stress (overwhelming or stimulating); (b) the complexity of the conflict (one-dimensional or multidimensional); (c) the relative importance of the conflict to each person (high/low, equal/different); (d) the available time to discuss the conflict (very little, moderate, or much); (e) the level of trust among the relevant persons (high, medium, or low); (f) the quality of speaking and listening skills (supportive/active behavior versus behavior that produces defensiveness); (g) the group or organizational culture (protective and political versus open and honest); and (h) the importance of the relationship (high, medium, or low). Through a mini-lecture, group discussion, and practice, people can easily learn to read a conflict situation in order to choose which mode to use at first and how to then switch from one mode to another as the situation changes.

Step 4 is to practice, practice, practice using each mode effectively. If you choose to avoid, how do you do that in a manner that respects and honors the other people in the situation? If you choose to compete, how do you get your way in a manner that engenders trust, respect, and a supportive culture (assuming you want those relationships to last)? How do you compromise so the door stays open for collaboration in the future, especially if the topic becomes more important to both of you? As I emphasized before, it's one thing to know how to choose the theoretically best mode in a given situation, but it's quite another to enact it effectively, efficiently, and with dignity. Typically, role-playing a number of conflict situations and getting feedback from others (in a supportive group) will help you learn how to use each mode to its full potential.

Step 5 is to keep improving how you read the key attributes of a conflict situation and how you choose and enact different conflict modes, and to learn how you can engender more trust and supportive communication in both your personal life and work life.

Psychological types and conflict modes



Many years ago, TKI co-author Ken Thomas and I correlated the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator® (MBTI®) assessment with the TKI assessment. We wanted to see whether certain enduring personality traits would

predispose people to use certain conflict-handling modes more than others.

Tip #9

We found that people who prefer Extraversion are more likely to use collaborating, while people who prefer Introversion are more inclined to use avoiding (as a statistically significant correlation, not as a one-to-one relationship). It seems that collaborating requires a little extra energy in interacting with others (sharing ideas and discussing concerns), while avoiding naturally involves an element of shyness or aloofness in an interpersonal situation.

Tip #10

In addition, we found that the Thinking preference is related to competing, while the Feeling preference is related to accommodating (again, as a statistically significant correlation). Perhaps the Thinking preference allows a person to keep an emotional distance from the other person—to pursue their own needs at the expense of the other person's. Meanwhile, the Feeling person's empathy for the other person might compel them to satisfy the other's needs more than their own.

For decades, I've been making use of both assessment tools in training and consulting projects so that people can become more aware of their proclivities for using certain conflict modes too much and others too little—based on their psychological type. With that awareness, people can then consciously compensate with their conflict-handling behavior.

Someone with an Introversion preference can knowingly put out some extra effort in order to engage another person in a collaborative discussion (when the necessary conditions for collaborating are evident).

Similarly, a person who prefers Feeling can knowingly assert their needs, when competing is called for, when their natural tendency would automatically be to accommodate the other person's needs.

For the original article that reported the correlations between the MBTI and the TKI assessments, see www.kilmanndiagnostics.com/interpersonal.html.

Tip #11

Problem management and conflict modes



Every member in an organization can be viewed as a problem manager, whose function can be usefully categorized into five steps: (1) sensing problems (noting whether a gap exists between “what is” and “what could or should be” that breaks a threshold of acceptability); (2) defining problems (uncovering the root cause of the gap); (3) deriving solutions (choosing ways and means to close the gap); (4) implementing solutions (putting the chosen solution to effective use in a living, breathing organization); and (5) evaluating outcomes (reassessing whether the gap is still beyond a threshold of acceptability and, if it is, determining which errors of problem management were made along the way); then the process continues.

The most damaging errors of problem management are in steps 2 and 4: defining problems and implementing solutions. Why? If you define the problem incorrectly, everything else you do in the remaining steps will be a complete waste of time and resources, no matter what

the quality of the solution or how well you implement it. And if you fail to implement the solution properly—by ignoring egos, culture, resistance, fear, and office politics—you nullify everything that came before, including defining problems and deriving solutions.

The collaborating mode, therefore, is best suited for defining problems and implementing solutions. These two steps are the most complex, since they deal with multiple perspectives and human nature. They are also the most important to get right, for the reasons noted above. As a result, it is worth the time and effort to create all the relevant conditions needed for using the collaborating mode, including cultural norms that encourage trust and candor, interpersonal skills for creative speaking and listening, a genuine spirit of teamwork and cooperation, and a performance appraisal system that explicitly rewards an engaging dialogue for complex problems.

Sensing problems and evaluating outcomes, however, are largely go/no-go decisions. Do we proceed (or continue) with problem management, or do we stop the process? As such, the conflict modes along the distributive dimension—competing, accommodating, and compromising—work just fine in the first and last steps of problem management. Either you proceed or not (one person accommodates the other or insists on proceeding with the process) or you both develop a compromise approach (proceeding for a certain amount of time, until you can better assess the importance of the gap).

The step of deriving solutions is also relatively simple—even if it can involve a lot of details—once the problem has already been defined. Usually, several alternative solutions are possible with a decision-making model, such as doing an expected-value or cost-benefit analysis. A combination of competing and accommodating can then be used to select one of the proposed solutions, depending on how important the solution is to one person versus the other, or compromising can be the mode of choice—deriving a solution that combines a few features of the different proposed solutions.

In the final analysis, the particular conflict modes used during each step of problem management have a great bearing on organizational success. If people avoid

the large gaps between strategic goals and current performance, or between what key stakeholders want and what they receive, everyone will suffer. And if the two most important steps of problem management—defining problems and implementing solutions—are avoided, minimized, or addressed on the distributive dimension, the members will cycle through the steps of problem management, again and again, with all their gaps remaining the same or actually getting worse. Instead, using the right conflict mode for the appropriate step of problem management will increase the likelihood of resolving the organization's most important problems, the first time around.

Assumptional analysis and conflict modes

A while back, Ian Mitroff and I developed a systematic methodology for uncovering—and then revising—the hidden assumptions behind decisions and actions. This same methodology can provide new ways of thinking about and then choosing the right conflict mode for a given situation.

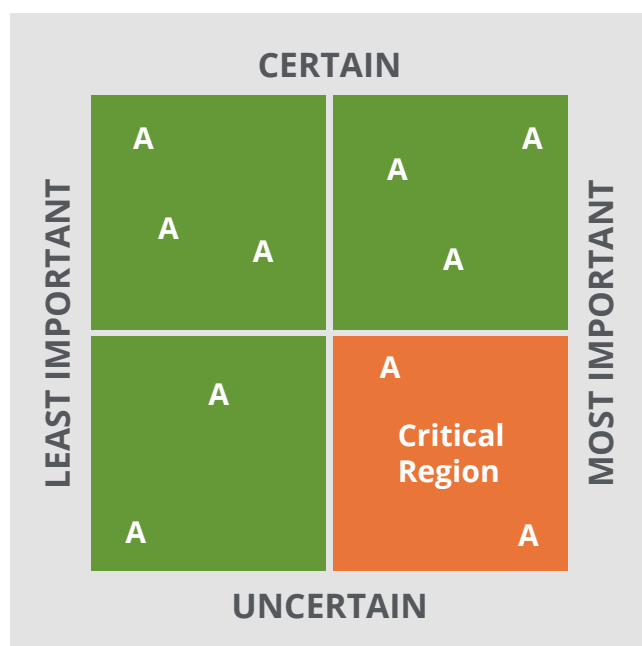
I define assumptions as all the things that would have to be true in order to argue, most convincingly, that your beliefs are valid and that your actions will be effective.



Tip #12

The beauty of “assumptual analysis” is first surfacing all the underlying, often unstated assumptions so you can find out if they are actually true, false, or uncertain. By seeing your assumptions face-to-face, you have the chance to revise them, which will surely inspire you to change your beliefs or modify your behavior.

Assumptual analysis begins by stating, either orally or in writing, your belief or intended behavior: “Using the competing mode is the best way for me to resolve this conflict at this time.” You then write out what would have to be true about each aspect of the situation—the other person or persons, the culture of the organization, the reward system, and so forth—in order for you to argue that your choice of mode will be most effective for you and others, including the organization, both short term and long term.



In most cases, you will write out from 10 to 30 assumptions about all the people—both internal and external stakeholders—to support your behavioral intention. To give maximum support for the competing mode, for example, you would have to assume that the outcome of the conflict is more important to you than to others. You might also have to assume that the culture of the organization actively discourages people from taking the time to develop a more in-depth, bwin-win solution for all concerned. Moreover, to give maximum support for the competing mode, you would also have to

assume that there wouldn't be any unintended consequences from asserting your needs over other people's needs in this organization.

You then sort all your assumptions according to two distinctions: (1) how important the assumption is to your behavioral intention (most important versus least important) and (2) now that you recognize your assumption, how certain you are about whether it is true or false—or perhaps you have no idea (certain versus uncertain). These distinctions result in four categories of assumptions: (1) most important and certain, (2) most important and uncertain, (3) least important and certain, and (4) least important and uncertain. **Not surprisingly, the primary focus for this analysis is on the most important assumptions that can negate your best intentions.** In particular, any assumption (A) that falls into the Critical Region makes you most vulnerable to being dead wrong. If you are wrong about that assumption, you can no longer argue for the efficacy of your behavioral intention—and yet you have no idea if that assumption is actually true or false!

By seeing which assumptions are most important and false, however, you can easily revise them without further discussion or investigation. Often, it's startling to discover that you were about to use a conflict mode that was solidly based on an assumption you already knew to be false!

By seeing which assumptions are most important and uncertain—since these assumptions are just as likely to be either true or false—you can now spend some time to investigate the truth or falsity of these assumptions through further discussion or research and then revise them, based on what you learn. For example, if I must assume that my needs are more important than yours, how do I know that? Maybe I need to ask you outright, rather than make blind assumptions that will surely undermine my approach to conflict management.

We are always making all kinds of unstated, untested assumptions about the other people in a conflict situation, including the attributes of the organization itself.

By being more aware of your assumptions, however, you can significantly improve your success in choosing the right modes and then resolving our conflicts. But since it takes time to do assumptional analysis, you should use this method only when the conflict is very important to resolve and you are right about this assumption.

For more information about assumptional analysis, see my article on problem management at www.kilmann-diagnostics.com/problem.html.



Cultural norms and conflict modes

The culture of a family, community, or organization partially determines whether the use of a given conflict mode—particularly collaborating— will be successful. Here’s how the actual norms can first be identified and then be changed into desired norms, so that all conflict modes can be used effectively.

In the case of a work group (though the same could be applied to a family or community), members are introduced to the concept of cultural norms—the unwritten, unspoken rules of the road: how to get by or survive, or simply “how things are done around here.”

Several examples are given: “Don’t disagree with the boss, regardless of whether they ask for input; don’t share information with other groups; don’t rock the boat; don’t make waves; don’t try anything new; and don’t trust anyone who seems sincere.”

With these examples, most people have little difficulty in surfacing the cultural norms that are flourishing in their work group or organization—which constitutes the actual norms. By the way, it usually helps to have this discussion in peer groups, without the immediate boss present; otherwise, the actual norms might prevent members from voicing their true opinions.

Then the work group is asked to generate a different list. What are the desired norms that would promote satisfaction, high performance, and the capacity to address all important conflicts out in the open (with the collaborating mode, for example)? Usually, the members develop a list of desired norms that are 180 degrees different from their prior list: “Take the chance to state your true opinions in public; trust that others have good intentions; even if you were badly hurt or disappointed before, try new and better ways of doing things; be willing to learn new ways of interacting with others; and, since we are all on the same team, let’s work together by sharing all that we know about a problem or conflict.”



The difference between actual and desired norms is a culture-gap. The focus then shifts on how to close all the identified gaps using the steps of problem management—sensing problems, defining problems, deriving solutions, implementing solutions, and evaluating outcomes.

Essentially, once the members have sensed a significant problem—a gap between what is and what could or should be that breaks a threshold of acceptability—they then proceed to determine the root cause of the gap, often the fear of again being hurt, disappointed, ridiculed, or devalued.

Next, solutions are suggested that would close the gap, which is, ironically, greatly facilitated by having an open discussion about culture-gaps. Then one or more solutions are implemented—for example, developing an informal reward system whereby people remind one another of the desired norms whenever it seems that the actual norms have crept back into the workplace.

Finally, in a few weeks, the members evaluate whether they have succeeded in closing their largest culture-gaps, again by developing lists of actual and desired norms and then taking note of any remaining gaps. And the cycle of problem management continues.

Unless a family, community, or work group consciously—and deliberately—identifies and closes its culture-gaps, cultural norms tend to stay negative, if only because people are naturally compelled to protect themselves from further harm, whether feared or imagined or projected from past experiences. But if the culture is managed explicitly, as suggested above, then the trust, candor, openness, and willingness to change, which are the key attributes needed to support the collaborating mode, will enable members to fully satisfy their most important needs and wants.

For more information about uncovering dysfunctional cultural norms, see www.kilmannndiagnostics.com/diagnosingculture.html.

The avoiding culture in many organizations

Many organizations seem to have a strong avoiding culture, which can best be investigated with a specific change in TKI instructions.



Tip #14

Instead of asking members to respond to the 30 forced-choice items in general terms, per the official TKI instructions, I provide these modified instructions: “Inside this organization, when you find your wishes differing from those of another person, how do you usually respond?”

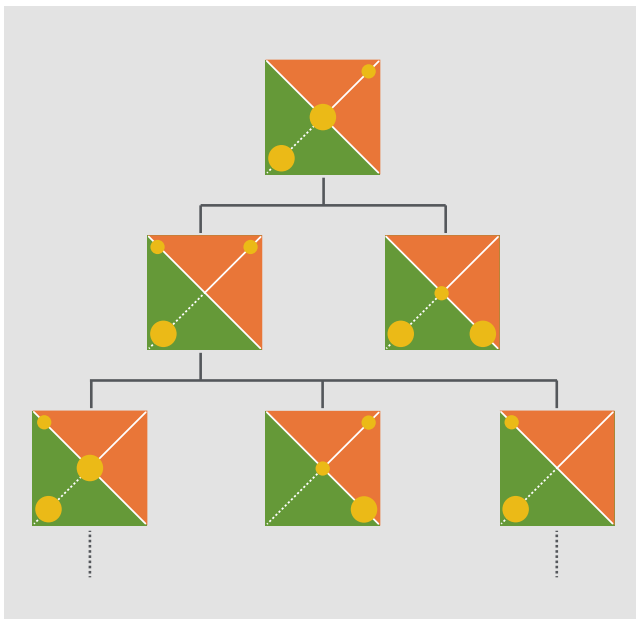
What’s the impact of this change in instructions? Rather than a person’s responses to the TKI assessment being an average of all the conflict situations they face (which, for example, can vary significantly between home and work) with the modified instructions, their responses on the TKI assessment are specifically geared to her behavior in the workplace. When I then average the raw TKI scores of groups, departments, and the whole organization, I usually find that avoiding is in the top 25%, suggesting that it is being used too much, while one or more of the assertive modes (collaborating, competing, and compromising) are in the lower portion of the TKI profile and thus being used too little.

As a sharp contrast to this finding, on a second TKI assessment I ask the same people to respond to these instructions: “Outside this organization, when you find your wishes differing from those of another person, how do you usually respond?” When I average the results from these modified instructions by group, department, and the whole organization, I am no longer surprised to find that members have more balanced profiles, and, in fact, the avoiding mode may even be in the low 25% on the TKI profile, while the more assertive modes often appear in the middle 50% or high 25%.

This consistent finding from two different TKI assessments—with the two different sets of instructions—suggests that the culture in the organization has taught people to avoid confronting others, even on matters that are very important to both the organization and its members. And the avoiding culture might also be reinforced by a reward system that penalizes people

who confront their managers, as witnessed by who gets special assignments, bonuses, favors, and promotions.

But once the members of the organization, including senior managers, have become aware of the avoiding culture that prevails in different departments and levels in their organization, a very meaningful discussion can unfold: “What are the long-term consequences if we continue avoiding the most important issues facing our organization because our culture and reward system have conditioned us to keep issues and problems to ourselves?”



The responses to this question then open up the vital topic that needs to be addressed with a great deal of assertiveness: “How can we purposely change our culture and reward system to support the use of all conflict modes, so we can bring about long-term satisfaction and success?”

To drive home this point, I make use of an organization chart and fill in each box with the TKI Conflict Model. For each group, department, and division in the organization, I then highlight which one or more modes are in the high 25% (by placing larger circles on the TKI Conflict Model within each box) and which modes are in the low 25% (by placing smaller circles in the appropriate locations on the model). This conflict mode organization chart is an eye-opener! Sometimes, only the lower levels are high on avoiding. But other times,

even the top managers (and all the boxes from top to bottom on the chart) are high on avoiding!

Keep in mind: Unless the TKI’s instructions are modified to specifically ask people about their responses to conflict in their work situation, an organizational assessment with the TKI tool might not be accurate, since employees may have responded to the tool with a great variety of other conflict situations in mind. But modifying the instructions to reflect a specific setting thus provides a more accurate—and thus more meaningful—diagnosis.

Resolving strategy-structure conflicts

Perhaps two of the most challenging conflicts confronting organizations concern formulating strategy and then deploying it throughout the organization’s lines of business, departments, work groups, and jobs. Just like the danger of defining a problem incorrectly, developing the wrong strategy throws everything out of whack.

Moreover, just like failing to implement a solution properly, not translating the general strategy into specific goals and objectives for every work unit in the organization prevents that strategy, no matter how well conceived, from being realized. One could also add (as discussed in the next section) that if the reward system does not inspire people to spend the right amount of time on the right tasks according to the right objectives, an organization’s strategy-structure will exist only in theory, on paper, but not in practice.

This is about the development and deployment of all the organization’s formal systems and resources, and then rewarding every jobholder for contributing their energy, wisdom, talent, and experience accordingly.

But to realize such harmony in reality requires the effective use of a particular conflict mode every step along the way—from formulating strategy to implementing structure—much like defining and solving any complex problem.

 **Tip #15**

Without a doubt, the primary reason that most organizations suffer from misaligned systems and fragmented efforts is precisely that they have failed at conflict management.

For any organization, there are many alternative strategic scenarios to consider. Are these different scenarios being voiced, documented, magnified, and then resolved into a coherent statement that will guide all subsequent decisions and actions?

One of the most vital uses of the collaborating mode is to allow for the diverse needs of both internal and external stakeholders to be fully satisfied. Alternatively, if organizations use the avoiding mode when faced with conflicting strategic alternatives, or use the accommodating and competing modes to pick one strategic option and dismiss the rest, or use the compromising mode to settle for a mission that leaves each stakeholder only partially satisfied, the prospects for long-term success are gloomy.

But even if the collaborating mode is extensively used for formulating strategy, the next series of conflicts involves how to redesign and redeploy the organization's resources (personnel, budgets, materials, information, policies, job designs, and so on) to actually realize that strategy.

As it turns out, there is an endless variety of structural designs. Some of these different structures would be much better at implementing the new strategy than others (for example, a horizontal flow of business processes versus a vertical hierarchy of traditional departments). Is the collaborating mode used to integrate these alternative structures? Or does the organization primarily use avoiding, accommodating, competing, and compromising to settle its structural conflicts, which surely results in the underutilization of scarce resources?

Just as the defining error and the implementing error are the most vital to minimize in the steps of problem management, the organization must create all the necessary conditions (an open culture, interpersonal skills, and teamwork) so the collaborating mode can and will be used for formulating and implementing

its strategy-structure. This needs to be subsequently backed by an aligned and credible reward system.

 **Tip #16**

Does an instrument assess “looking good” or actual behavior?

I will now conclude my favorite TKI insights by alerting you to a design issue that all credible assessment tools must resolve. Let me first provide a little background for this discussion.

In the 1960s, three instruments assessed the five conflict modes: Blake and Mouton (1964), Lawrence and Lorsch (1967), and Hall (1969). So why did Ken Thomas and I develop a fourth instrument to measure conflict-handling behavior?

Already by 1970, Ken and I were acutely aware of the potential social desirability response bias in all self-report assessments—the tendency for people to respond to test items in order to look good to themselves or others (whether this bias is conscious or unconscious) versus accurately disclosing their actual behavior or interests. For example, we suspected that most people would prefer to see themselves as high on collaborating and low on avoiding, regardless of their actual conflict-handling behavior. And perfectly in line with our initial expectations, when Ken and I collected research data on the three existing instruments, we found very high correlations between the social desirability of the five modes—measured in a few different ways—and people's actual mode scores on each self-report assessment. On average, more than 90% of the variance in mode scores was explained by social desirability (88%, 92%, and 96% for the Blake and Mouton, Lawrence and Lorsch, and Hall instruments, respectively). Consequently, for all practical purposes, these instruments were not measuring a person's conflict-handling modes, since people's scores were largely explained (accounted for) by social desirability. To make a long story short, Ken and I repeatedly tested the social desirability of many conflict items for our new instrument and then paired items (for example, a collaborating item was paired with an avoiding item) that were both equal in social desirability. Since a person could not choose any of the TKI's 30 A/B forced-

choice items merely to look good—the pairs had been matched on social desirability—respondents now had to disclose candidly how they actually behaved in conflict situations. Indeed, when Ken and I collected research data on the TKI instrument, just as we had done for the other three instruments, the variance of mode scores on the TKI instrument that could be explained by social desirability dropped to 17%, as compared to over 90% for the other three instruments. That was a huge improvement!

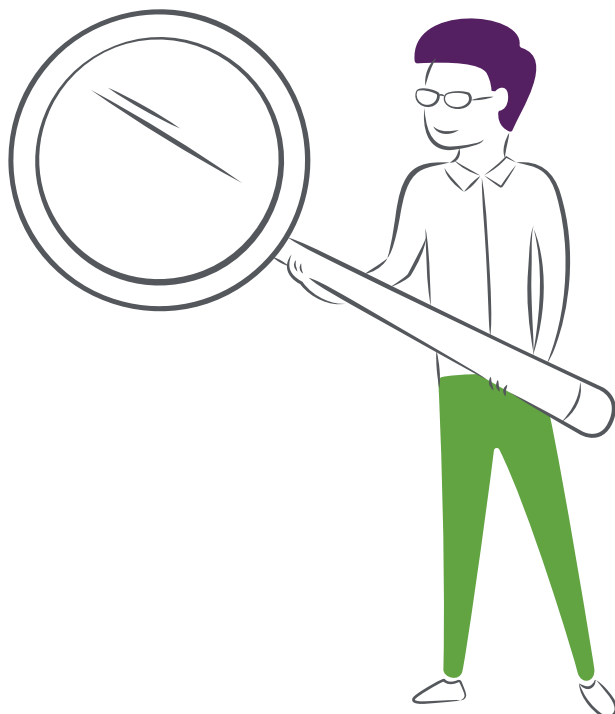
Over the past 50 years, quite a few people have told me that it's a bit demanding to respond to the TKI's A/B format—even though it takes less than 10 minutes to complete all 30 forced-choice items. But these comments don't surprise me. I believe that once the social desirability response bias has been removed from any instrument, it requires more diligence for respondents to disclose their actual behavior or preferences, rather than to simply pick items to look good. But the intent of every self-report instrument is to measure what it claims to measure, not some other concept—such as social desirability.

Several additional conflict assessments have been published since the 1970s. In virtually all cases, the

developers of those new instruments use something other than a forced-choice format (such as a five- or seven-point Likert scale for each conflict item), because they want to make their assessment easier for respondents. And yet, these developers seem to be unaware of what effect different scaling methods have on the social desirability response bias.

In the interest of ease, and ease alone, these newer assessments of the five conflict modes have thus fallen into the same trap as those three original assessments developed back in the 1960s. What goes around comes around! But ease of responding—by implicitly giving people the opportunity to look good to themselves or others—is no substitute for a valid assessment. In fact, I believe that the lasting and growing success of the TKI assessment over the past 40 years is precisely due to the fact that it minimizes the social desirability response bias and thus provides its users with an accurate assessment of their relative propensity to use the five conflict-handling modes.

For the original publication that compared the four conflict instruments on social desirability, see kilmandiagnostics.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Thomas-Kilmann-Four-Instruments.pdf.



About the author

If you'd like to deepen your knowledge about any of the above topics, Kilmann Diagnostics offers several online courses, including BASIC Training in Conflict Management, ADVANCED Training in Conflict Management, Culture Management, and Assumptional Analysis. These courses make expert use of the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI) and other assessment tools. Since these courses are recorded, they can be taken on any day, at any time, and at your own pace. To learn more, visit www.kilmanniagnostics.com.

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In 2023, Dr. Kilmann published his first and only book that focuses exclusively on the TKI assessment tool: *Mastering the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument: Celebrating More Than 50 Years of Resolving All Kinds of Conflicts*.

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