Activity – Conflict Styles
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Assessment adapted from Reginald Adkins 2006.

What is your preferred conflict management style?

People typically have a preferred way of dealing with conflict based on many variables, like temperament, personality, background, environment, values, beliefs, experiences, and stage of life. Psychologists (Blake & Mouton, Thomas & Kilman) have described five major styles of conflict management. None is superior to any other, and it is possible to have more than one style.
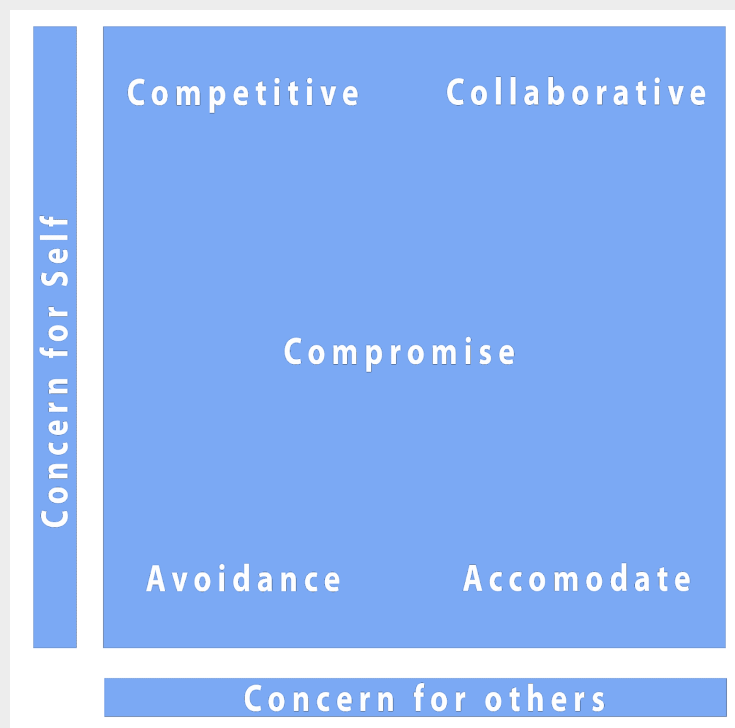
The graph above, adapted from Moore (1986), shows how higher and lower concern for self and others affects how people manage conflict. The middle represents a medium concern for self and others.

Thomas and Kilmann (1974) suggest that in a conflict situation, a person's behaviour can be assessed on two factors:

1. **Commitment to self, goals or assertiveness**—the extent to which an individual (or a group) attempts to satisfy their own concerns or goals.
2. **Commitment to others, relationships or cooperation**—the extent to which an individual (or a group) attempts to satisfy the concerns of the others, and the importance of the relationship with others.

Thomas and Kilmann use these factors to explain five different approaches to dealing with conflict:

Avoiding
Competing
Accommodating
Compromising
Collaborating

Avoiding: "Conflict? What Conflict?"

This approach is common for people who view conflict negatively. It avoids addressing any conflicts or issues, and avoids standing up for either self or others. Avoiders typically do not get what they want or need, and others feel the same. In this lose-lose approach, neither party addresses what causes their conflict, and both may feel unfulfilled or ignored.

Avoiding	Self: Low. Others: Low. Lose-Lose.
Types of Avoiding:	Physical flight. Mental withdrawal. Ignoring or changing the subject. Blaming or minimizing. Denial that the problem exists. Postponement to a more appropriate time (which may never occur). Use of emotions (tears, anger, etc.).
Appropriate when:	The issue is trivial or unimportant, or another issue is more pressing. Potential damage outweighs potential benefits. Timing for dealing with the conflict is inappropriate (because of overwhelming emotions or lack of information). Outcomes are not necessary.
Inappropriate when:	You care about the issue. Negative feelings may linger.
Results:	The dispute is not resolved. Disputes often build up and eventually explode. Low satisfaction results in complaining, discontentment, and talking back. Stress spreads to other parties (like co-workers or family).

Competing: "My way is the only way."

While taking a stance may be warranted, this is a win-lose approach, using whatever power is necessary to win, pursuing one party's goals at another party's expense. It may display as defending a position, interest, or value. This approach may be supported by social institutions (courts, legislatures, quotas, etc.) and can be initiated by the actions of one party. Competition may be appropriate or inappropriate (as defined by the expectations of the relationship). This style may be seen as demanding, selfish, or bullying. With this approach, the loser can feel short-changed or that their needs are being ignored.

Competing	Self: High. Others: Low. Win-Lose.
Types of Competing	Power of authority, control, position, or majority. Power of persuasion, arguing, or contending. Pressure techniques like coercion, intimidation, or threats. Disguising the issue, outsmarting. Tying relationship issues to substantive issues.
Appropriate when:	The issue is trivial, or others do not care about what happens. There are short time frames and quick action is vital. Tough decisions require leadership (e.g., enforcing unpopular rules, cost cutting, discipline).
Inappropriate when:	Cooperation from others is important. Respect from others is diminished needlessly.
Results	Assumes no reciprocating power will come from the other side; people tend to reach for whatever power they have when threatened. Increases the likelihood of future problems between parties. Restricts communication and decreases trust. The conflict may escalate or the other party may withdraw. Reduces the quality and durability of agreement.

Competing: "My way is the only way."

Accommodating: "Whatever you want is okay with me."

In this lose-win approach one party ignores or overrides their own concerns to satisfy the concerns of the other party. Accommodators typically will not ask for anything in return, and can get resentful if a reciprocal relationship is not established. Once resentment grows, accommodators often shift to a competing approach because they are tired of being "used." Others may take advantage of them, and accommodators may feel they never have their own needs fulfilled.

Accommodating	Self: Low. Others: High. Lose-Win.
Types of Accommodating:	Playing down the conflict to maintain surface harmony. Self-sacrifice. Yielding to the other's demands or point of view. Appeasement, agreement, and flattery.
Appropriate when:	The issue is trivial to you, or more important to the other party. Preserving harmony is more important than the outcome. It's necessary to build up good faith for future problem solving. You are wrong, or in a situation where competition could damage your position. You are flexible on the outcome. Attempting to "take turns."
Inappropriate when:	Used habitually to gain acceptance. Likely to increase resentment. A likely lack of reciprocity will result in escalating the conflict.
Results:	Builds relationships that will allow you to be more effective in future problem solving. Increases the chances that the other party may be more accommodating to your needs in the future. Hopes to establish reciprocal adaptations or adjustments. Does not improve communication.

Compromising: "Meet me in the middle."

The objective of this approach is often a quick solution that will work for both parties, resolving multiple issues in a short period of time. Usually it involves both parties giving up something and meeting in the middle. For example, a buyer and a seller may compromise to find a final price that is neither as high nor as low as either would prefer. This style can work well for people in long-term relationships who interact over time, like neighbours, family members, or members of an organisation. One party may give up what they want today- in exchange for another day. Both parties will eventually get what they want; but may have to wait until it is their turn. For example, siblings may compromise about taking turns with a new toy; neighbours may compromise about taking turns to repair fences.

Compromising	Self: Medium. Others: Medium. Win/Lose – Lose/Win.
Types of Compromising:	Splitting the difference. Exchanging concessions. Finding middle ground. Reducing expectations, negotiating, a little something for all involved.
Appropriate when:	Time pressures require quick solutions. Cooperation is important, but resources are limited. Short-term solutions are needed until more information can be obtained. Finding a resolution is better than nothing. Collaboration or competition fails.
Inappropriate when:	You can not live with the consequences.
Results:	No relationship is established; and, relationship will not deteriorate. Sense of stalemate. Does not explore the issue in any depth. Both parties may feel they 'lost the battle' and 'need to get even' next time.

Collaborating "Let's solve this problem together!"

For this approach to be effective, trust and willingness for risk is required to meet the concerns of all parties. Individuals come up with a variety of solutions, working on these together, and the one chosen is one consented to by everyone. This win-win approach helps all parties feel a balanced solution was reached for everyone to feel satisfied.

Collaborating	Self: High. Others: High. Win-Win.
Types of Collaborating:	Maximizing use of fixed resources, or working to increase resources.
	Listening and communicating to promote understanding of interests and values.
	Learning from each other's insight.
	Gathering information, and looking for other options.
	Agreeing to disagree.
Appropriate when:	Adequate time is available.
	The issues and/or the relationship are both significant.
	Both parties want to address all concerns, and are committed to the process.
	The issue is too important to compromise.
	There are diverse interests and issues at play.
	New insights can be beneficial in achieving creative solutions.
	There is a desire to work through hard feelings that have been a deterrent to problem solving.
	Participants can be future focused.
Inappropriate when:	Time and resources are limited.
	Issues are trivial.
Results:	Builds relationships.
	Promotes creative solutions.
	Improves potential for future problem solving.

All approaches to conflict can be appropriate at some times, and no style is better than another.   Most people have one style that they prefer, since it feels most comfortable, but it can be overused. Most people react with their preferred style when under stress. With practice and self-awareness, people can learn to shift from their preferred style.

Ideally, people can use different styles in various circumstances. To most effectively deal with conflict, people can learn to consider the situation and determine which approach is most appropriate. Some approaches may escalate conflict, damage relationships, and reduce the ability to effectively meet goals. Some approaches will build trust in relationships, accomplish goals, and de-escalate conflict. Everyone has the capacity to learn and apply each style as needed.

What Does Each Approach Need?

Sometimes an approach may not be helpful to the situation. Ideally you can be flexible and shift your approach according to the situation. When someone else is taking an approach that is not helpful, try to understand what needs may underlie their approach.

When dealing with others who may not have developed their capacity to shift from their preferred style of conflict, try to listen well. By understanding the needs beneath the surface of the conflict, people can often work together toward a common goal.   Here are a few examples:

Avoiders may need to feel physically or emotionally safe. Try taking the time to assure them that they are going to be heard and listened to.

Competitors may need to feel that something will be accomplished in order to meet their goals. Try saying: "We will work out a solution; it may take some time for us to get there."

Accommodators may need to know that no matter what happens, your relationship will remain intact. Try saying: "This will not affect our relationship or how we work together."

Compromisers may need to know that they will get something later. Try saying: "Can we go with my choice this time, and next time you can choose." (Be true to your word.)

Collaborators may need to know what you want before they are comfortable sharing their needs. Try saying: "I need this, this, and this. . . . What do you need?"

[Take the assessment](#) **developed by Reginald (Reg) Adkins, PhD, Elemental Truths.**

Scoring the Conflict Management Styles Assessment

As stated, the 15 statements correspond to the five conflict management styles. To find your most preferred style, total the points for each style. <u>The style with the highest score indicates your most commonly used strategy</u>. The one with the lowest score indicates your least preferred strategy. However, all styles have pros and cons, so it's important that you can use the most appropriate style for each conflict situation.

Style Corresponding Statements: Total:

Collaborating (questions 1, 5, 7): _____

Competing: (questions 4, 9, 12): _____

Avoiding: (questions 6, 10, 15): _____

Accommodating: (questions 3, 11, 14): _____

Compromising: (questions 2, 8, 13) _____

My preferred conflict management style is: _____

The conflict management style I would like to work on is: _____

How can I practice this conflict management style?

_____

_____

_____

_____

Discussion:

For which conflict style did you get the highest score? How accurately does this reflect your preference? Did you score high on any other styles? If so, which ones? How might those styles relate to one another? Are there pieces of the descriptions of the conflict styles you disagree with? If so, why? Why might someone use a different conflict style in different environments or situations (e.g at work or at home)?

Take a moment to think about your preferred approach to conflict. How might you adapt your approach to conflict when working with others?

References

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