



Focus

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The Five Modes of Handling Conflict

Conflict arises when desires of people appear to be incompatible, and is a routine part of life and business. Effectively handling conflict requires both the wisdom to choose the right approach and the ability to manage the situation. Mastering this essential leadership skill begins with identifying various conflict handling approaches and learning when to use a particular mode.

Psychologists Kenneth Thomas and Ralph Kilmann proposed five different conflict handling modes in 1974. Their work described a person's behavior along two dimensions, assertiveness – a focus on your own concerns – and cooperation, the extent to which you attempt to satisfy the other party's concerns. The resulting Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode interpretative instrument has remained a popular tool since that time, and the highlights of its five conflict resolution modes follow.

Competing is a power-oriented, uncooperative mode in which a person pursues his or her own objectives at the expense of others. The goal is "to win." The competing mode is usually appropriate in the following situations:

- When quick, decisive action is vital
- On important issues where unpopular actions need to be carried out
- On issues vital to the company when you know you are right

Accommodating is the opposite of competing. In this mode you neglect your own concerns to satisfy those of another person. The goal is "to yield." This mode is typically used when:

- You realize you are wrong, or when you are losing and continued competition would only damage your interests
- You want to make a goodwill gesture and the issue is much more important to the other person than to you
- Preserving harmony and avoiding disruption are especially important

Collaborating involves working with the other person to find a win/win solution. This mode is characterized by high levels of assertiveness *and* cooperation on both sides, with attention focused on identifying the essential needs of each side. Collaboration is typically appropriate in the following situations:

There is a strong need to find an innovative solution because the needs of all parties are too important to be compromised

When your objective is to learn, or to merge insights from people with different perspectives on a problem

To gain commitment by incorporating the concerns of others into a consensus decision

Compromising is an attempt to find a mutually acceptable solution that at least partially meets the needs of both parties. This mode differs from collaborating in two areas: 1) There is a lower intensity level of assertiveness and cooperation, and 2) Some needs may be sacrificed so that others can be met. The goal is “to find a middle ground.” Compromising is usually appropriate in the following situations:

When two opponents are strongly committed to mutually exclusive goals

When moderately important goals are not worth the potential disruption from more assertive bargaining

To arrive at an expedient solution under time pressure, or as a backup mode when collaboration or competition fails

Avoiding the conflict means neither party’s concerns are addressed or immediately pursued. The goal is “to delay.” Consider avoidance in the following situations:

When the potential costs of confronting an issue outweigh the benefits of resolving the issue

To allow time for people to cool down, reduce tensions, and regain perspective and composure

When gathering more information is more important than an immediate decision

Each of these five conflict-handling modes is useful, and effective leaders learn that success begins with choosing the right resolution mode for the circumstances. Moreover, several modes may be used during the course of resolving a single issue because situations change. For example, avoidance, competition, and then compromising modes may be used as negotiations of a difficult issue proceed. To quote the original researchers, “The effectiveness of each mode varies according to when it is used.”

Regarding using the right mode and personal preferences, Dr. Kilmann offered a useful summary, saying, “Each of us is capable of using all five conflict-handling modes. None of us can be characterized as having a single style of dealing with conflict. Everyone is capable of using each of these five modes interchangeably but typically use some more readily than others . . . whether because of temperament or practice. Your conflict behavior in the workplace is therefore a result of both your personal predispositions and the requirements of the situation in which you find yourself.”

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