

Module: Conflict Modes and how to use them

Module in Communication Skills for Supervisors

An introduction to the Thomas Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI)

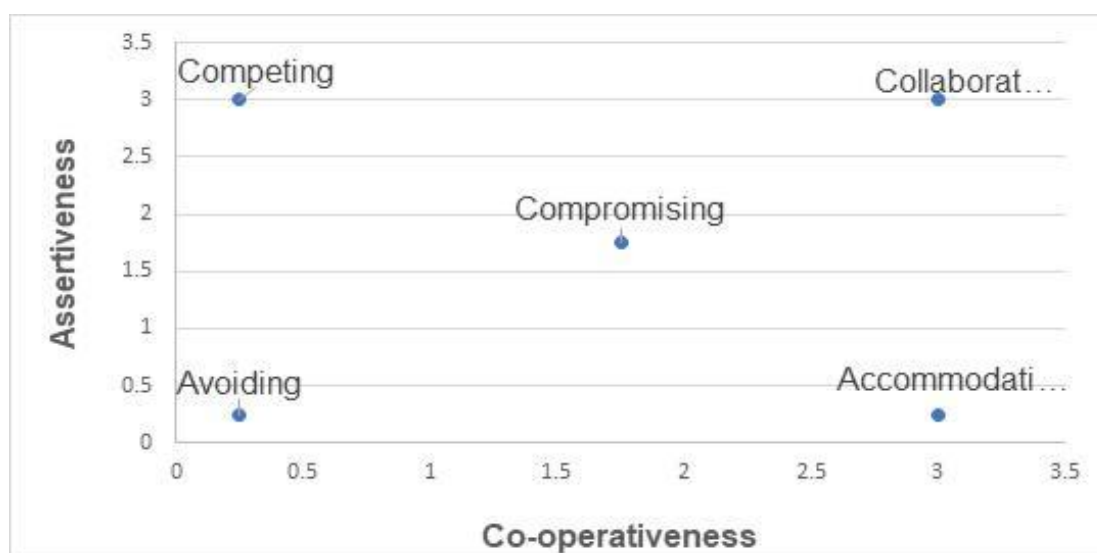
The Thomas Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument is a simple model which can be used to support people to identify and adapt their ways of dealing with conflict.

This tool describes the model and shows how to support trainees to adapt their approach to dealing with conflict.

The model was developed by Kenneth W. Thomas and Ralph H. Kilmann in 1974¹². It was based on the managerial grid model which had been developed by Robert R. Blake and Jane Mouton in the 1960s³.

The managerial grid model focuses on two axes, one is 'concern for people', the other 'concern for production'. From this grid Blake and Moulton created five different management styles at the intersection points of high and low on each axis – impoverished, country club, produce or perish, middle of the road and team.

Thomas and Kilmann used the idea of the **x** and **y** axes and the five points of contact in the context of how people deal with conflict. The two axes in their conflict mode model are co-operativeness (the extent to which someone tries to meet the needs or concerns of another) and assertiveness (the degree to which someone tries to meet their own needs or concerns). Both assertiveness and co-operativeness have their place and are necessary at times. From these they suggest five different conflict modes as set out in the diagram below.



Thomas Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument

Conflict Modes - an introduction

Each of the points represents the balance between the two tendencies:

Avoiding	avoiding the conflict or avoiding dealing with the conflict
Accommodating	attempting to meet the needs or concerns of the other person at the cost of your own
Competing	attempting to get your own concerns met at the cost of the other person's concerns
Compromising	attempting to reach a middle-ground where both give some ground to the other's concerns as well as meeting their own to a certain extent
Collaborating	attempting to reach a place where both parties' needs and concerns can be met

There are times when each of these approaches could be helpful. Sometimes we do have to make sure we 'win' the 'argument' or show how important something is to us in order to progress. At other times we might need to avoid something until a more suitable moment.

However, if someone *always* has to win the argument or *always* avoids conflict, this might impact their relationship with others. It is valuable to be able to adapt ways of approaching conflict as it gives more choice in the moment, can bring something new to the interaction and may lead to a better outcome.

This model can be a useful way to support trainees to reflect on how they are dealing with conflict and how they might adapt their approach.

How to use the model

The full model involves completing a questionnaire assessment based on choosing a preference between 30 pairs of statements.⁴⁵ The results indicate which modes are most commonly used by the individual. This is the most robust way to assess conflict modes. (Details of where to access the assessment are at the end of this module).

However, it is possible to informally recognise which mode or modes are most commonly used. There are of course risks associated with this, in that people like to see themselves in a particular way – which was one of the reasons Thomas and Kilmann developed their tool. However, it can still form the basis of a useful discussion.

For example, it could be that in a public place where senior staff are visible, a trainee may try to avoid conflict because they do not want to be seen as challenging. With friends this same trainee might be competitive in conflict situations.

Example of how to use the model with a trainee

Here is an example of how to use the model with a trainee who has been dealing with a conflict situation. It can be helpful to draw the simple grid with the five points as shown in the diagram above.

- *I'd like to share a model with you to support you to find a way to deal differently with this situation.*
- *This model suggests there are five different ways that people tend to deal with conflict – avoiding, accommodating, competing, compromising and collaborating.*
- *We all tend to have a default tendency in the way we deal with conflict – none are right or wrong.*
- *When you think about your situation, which mode or modes do you think you are using?*
- *How effective is that for you?*
- *What difference could it make to try another mode?*
- *Which would you be willing to try?*
- *What might that mean in practice for you?*
- *What might you say if you are trying to (for example) compromise rather than avoid the conflict?*
- *Great. And when might you be able to do that?*

Trainer exercise 1 – Thinking about trainees

1. If you are dealing with a conflict situation between trainees:
 - i. Thinking about one of these trainees. which of the five modes do you think they have they been using?
 - ii. How could you engage the trainee in a conversation about conflict modes?
 - iii. What might be a useful step forward?
 - iv. If it is useful, do the same thinking about the other trainee.
 - v. How might you facilitate a conversation between them (if appropriate)?
2. Encourage trainees to role play different conflict modes if possible, perhaps with a fellow trainee or a friend, so they become familiar with being able to adapt their style. Trainees could be introduced to our Conflict Modes worksheet for trainees – which sets out a range of examples of things to say in each mode.

Optional Trainer Reflective Exercises

If you would like to become more familiar with your own way of dealing with conflict:

1. Spend some time reflecting on how you see conflict and which mode(s) you might commonly use.
2. Imagine how it would be to try out a different approach. If possible, role play a conversation to practice a mode that is less comfortable or familiar for you.

Other worksheets & podcasts to look at in the module

- Feedback – tools and techniques.
- Conflict modes – an introduction for trainees
- Podcast on Medication for Supervisors and Educators

Further reading and resources

1. KENNETH W. THOMAS, University of California, Los Angeles; RALPH H. KILMANN, University of Pittsburgh. *The Social Desirability Variable in Organizational Research: An Alternative Explanation for Reported Findings*[^], (1975)
https://kilmanniagnostics.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Thomas-Kilmann_Social-Desirability.pdf
2. Ralph Kilmann's description of how he and Kenneth Thomas developed the TKI:
<https://kilmanniagnostics.com/a-brief-history-of-the-thomas-kilmann-conflict-mode-instrument/> [at 16.07.2021]
3. Robert R. Blake, Jane Mouton, *The Managerial Grid: The Key to Leadership Excellence*. Houston: Gulf Publishing Co. (1964).
4. Watch Dr Ralph Kilmann describe how to use the different modes in this short 2.5-minute video clip: <https://youtu.be/miwZ31chiFc>
5. To take the full assessment visit: <https://kilmanniagnostics.com/assessments/> (Please note there is a cost associated with this.)