



# THE LEADERSHIP GUIDE FOR MANAGING CONFLICT

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# Five Conflict-Management Styles

Conflict happens, whether we want it to or not. Most of us have a strong, visceral reaction to conflict, including (but not limited to) fear, avoidance, excitement, and/or dread. However, when you boil it down, conflict is just when one person's wishes and desires are different from another person's. It's the emotions that conflict evokes that can make situations seem explosive.

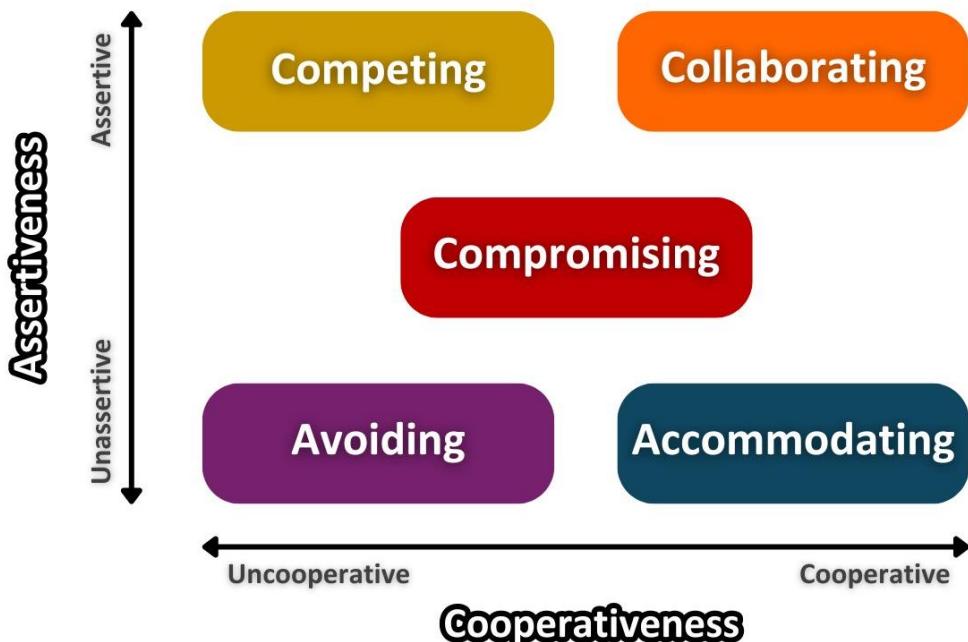
Leaders need to manage conflict when it arises. So where do leaders start when they want to understand the conflict styles of themselves and others? One of the preferred tools for developing this knowledge is the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI).

In this guide on conflict, we will introduce TKI, discuss the five ways to manage conflict, and provide practical tips and practice scenarios for leaders to use as they develop their conflict management skills.

## What is TKI?

TKI is a tool that assesses an individual's typical behavior in conflict situations and describes it along two dimensions: assertiveness and cooperativeness. It provides detailed information about how an individual can effectively use five different conflict-handling modes, or styles. TKI helps leaders understand how interpersonal group dynamics are affected by conflict-handling styles, and it helps them make informed decisions about choosing an appropriate style when approaching a conflict situation.

The TKI image below shows the five modes of conflict-handling and where each of them falls on the spectrum of assertiveness and cooperativeness. Next, we will go through each of the modes.



# The Five Styles Defined

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Depending on the circumstances, any of the conflict management modes can produce a positive or negative experience. But how do you decide which one is most appropriate for the situation? To be effective, leaders should understand all five conflict-handling styles and know which one to use. Understanding these different ways of approaching conflict also develops Emotional Intelligence (EQ), another key element to successful leadership.

Below, we will define each conflict-handling style and discuss when to use, and, just as importantly, when not to use them.

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## Competing



You try to satisfy your own concerns at another's expense. In this scenario, you win, and they lose. According to TKI, this conflict-handling style is high on the assertive scale and low on the cooperation scale. While some think competing is bad, it is necessary at times. Competing is appropriate to secure a job, earn a raise, win a new client, and find time on your manager's calendar. However, if conflict is only handled through competition, then you are ineffectively managing situations and people.

### When to use:

- There is an emergency that requires quick and decisive action.
- When unpopular steps are necessary, such as enforcing rules or disciplining team.
- The company is on the line and you know what it will take to get it back on track.
- When someone is taking advantage of noncompetitive behavior and you need to protect yourself and your interests.
- Job interviews, negotiating pay and getting on your manager's calendar.

### When not to use:

- If the outcome doesn't really matter to you, and there is no reason to compete.
- When you are not the subject matter expert; competing to be the strongest voice is inappropriate and will worsen the conflict.
- If you are angry and want to prove a point. Using power to express this anger is not beneficial.

*You may be overusing the competing mode if you find yourself surrounded by “yes men” or if others are afraid to admit mistakes or ask questions around you.*

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## Collaborating

You try to find a solution to conflict that satisfies all concerned—a win-win. Collaboration is high on both the assertiveness and the cooperation scale and takes a lot of time, resources, energy and bandwidth. Though many leaders encourage collaboration, it is often difficult for both parties to get exactly what they want, which is why it is used in high-risk situations. Often, when people say “collaborate,” they really mean either “compromise” or just “work together.”

### When to use:

- Your objective is to learn from the conflict and explore other people’s views.
- There are hard feelings between members of the conflict that need to be resolved.
- The concerns of both parties are too important to be compromised.

### When not to use:

- A quick decision is imperative to the situation.
- Resources are tight.
- The conflict is trivial and doesn’t require the time or resources needed for collaborating.

*You may be overusing collaboration if others are uncommitted to your decisions or policies.*



## Compromising

The solution only partially satisfies each member in the conflict. There are no winners or losers. Compromising is in the midrange of assertiveness and cooperation. It’s an acceptable solution, but be aware that if you are a leader who only compromises, the team may game the system and ask for more than what they need to compensate during negotiations.

### When to use:

- The potential disruption involved with asserting your goals is not worth the effort.
- The opposing members of the conflict are of equal power standing.
- The situation is complicated and needs more time to solve, so a temporary solution is needed.
- There is immense time pressure.

### When not to use:

- When compromising ultimately undermines the values and principles of the organization.
- If there’s an attitude of gaming, which will deflect attention from the merits of the actual issue.

*You may be overusing compromise if it takes away focus on larger issues or creates a cynical climate of gamesmanship.*



## Avoiding

You don't try to satisfy yourself or other people involved in the conflict. Instead, you stay away from the situation entirely. Avoiding conflict situations indicates low cooperation and low assertiveness, and it should be used when emotions are running high. This is just a band-aid for the conflict situation; nothing is resolved and the topic is put into a parking lot until later. The fact is, you will have to deal with the conflict eventually.

### When to use:

- Emotions are high, and people need to cool down so that productive solutions can be found.
- The issue at hand is just the result of a much simpler issue that can be more easily solved.
- Your team is fully capable of solving the conflict without your involvement.
- More information should be gathered before facing the conflict to resolve it more productively.
- The benefit of facing the conflict doesn't outweigh the cost of avoiding.

### When not to use:

- The decision at hand must be made quickly.
- The core reason is to avoid a frank conversation.

*You may be overusing the avoiding mode if there are timing issues due to waiting on input, concerns about “walking on eggshells,” or important decisions being made by default.*



## Accommodating

You are willing to sacrifice your own needs and desires for others involved in the conflict.

You lose and they win. Accommodating is considered high on the cooperation scale and low on the assertiveness scale. Some people think accommodation equates to being doormat, but this is untrue. Accommodation is the best tool to use in the right situation, such as when you are not the subject matter expert or when the outcome is not that important to you.

### When to use:

- Preserving harmony is the most important aspect of the conflict situation.
- The issue at hand is much more important to the other person or people involved in the conflict.
- You realize you are wrong. Accommodating in this situation shows that you are reasonable.
- You want to build social credits for future use.
- You are outmatched; it would only damage your cause in the long run if you didn't accommodate.
- For employee development to let your team experiment and learn from their mistakes.

### When not to use:

- Safety and security are paramount to resolving the conflict.
- The outcome of the conflict is vital to the organization's success.

*You may be overusing accommodation if discipline in the organization is lax or if you feel your ideas and concerns aren't getting the appropriate level of attention.*

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To be most effective, leaders should use all of these conflict styles. Being adaptable and nimble is a strength when it comes to facing conflict in an organization.

Now that we've learned about the five conflict-handling modes and discussed when to use (and not use) each style, it's time to test your skills. Below, we will present various conflict scenarios, and you can decide which mode, or combination of modes, would be most productive in reaching resolution.

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## Test Your Conflict-Handling Skills

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Now, let's put your conflict handling-skills to the test with a few scenarios. This will prepare you for any conflict scenario that arises in real-time.

Below, you will be faced with four individual conflict scenarios, and you will choose from the five TKI conflict-handling modes to identify the best (not the only) approach to the situation. Before testing your skills, please remember that not all conflicts are cut and dry. Many benefit from an evolving or hybrid approach. Good luck!

### Conflict Scenario 1

You and your colleague, Juan, have been assigned to work together on a pitch for a large potential account at your agency. You both have different approaches to the pitch; each one has a high potential for success. Now you've been told that you have one hour before presenting the pitch to your supervisor, and you can only present one pitch.

What is the best TKI conflict mode approach to this situation?

Competing

Collaborating

Compromising

Avoiding

Accommodating

## Conflict Scenario 2

You are working with the corporate legal department team to consider a new approach to the existing yearly proxy statement process. The team has worked diligently on the proposal for the past few months. One team member, Marie, is obsessed with minor details, and is holding up the submission of the proposal despite the team covering those details multiple times. Marie starts to get in a heated debate with other members on the team who feel the holdup is unnecessary and looks bad for the whole team. You engage with Marie to help her understand the team's perspective, and now she is debating with you. The outcomes of continuing a debate may not yield fruitful results for the team, and Marie is not in a position of authority.

What is the best TKI conflict mode approach to this situation?

Competing

Collaborating

Compromising

Avoiding

Accommodating

## Conflict Scenario 3

You have worked with a group of individuals that constantly end up saying “yes” to you. It is clear that you know what you want, when you want it, how you want it... and you usually get it. However, during your performance review, your supervisor noted that your team not only seems disengaged, but they also aren't developing. Your supervisor suggests you give them a greater role in decision-making and offer them more opportunities to create procedures. There's an exciting project that you want to be successful, which requires a team to accomplish, so you schedule a meeting with your team members to solidify their involvement in the project. At the meeting, the team begins to share their ideas, and you inform them that you've already thought through all of their suggestions on your own. Soon you realize many of your team members are saying absolutely nothing during the meeting. After the meeting, you learn many of your team members have decided to commit to a different project. You call a second meeting with your team.

What is the best TKI conflict mode approach to this situation?

Competing

Collaborating

Compromising

Avoiding

Accommodating

## Conflict Scenario 4

You are working with your manager, Alexis, on a project. Several weeks have passed, and you feel like you haven't gotten anywhere close to agreeing on an approach for completion. Alexis is juggling multiple projects and dealing with external pressures, which has left less time for the project at hand. Frustrated, confident in your ideas, and eager to get the project in motion, you ask to set aside some time for you two to really hammer down a solution. Alexis agrees, sets a time on the calendar for you two to meet the following day, and asks you to lead the meeting.

What is the best TKI conflict mode approach to this situation?

Competing

Collaborating

Compromising

Avoiding

Accommodating

Now that you have practiced your conflict-management skills, you can check your answers on the next page. They are not the only way to handle each conflict, but they represent the best choice of the five.

## Conclusion

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As conflict arises in your organization, pay attention to your immediate response. Ask yourself if your natural response is the best way to deal with the conflict. Identify your ideal outcome of the situation and adjust your conflict-handling mode to better facilitate that outcome.

Mastering conflict management through the TKI model equips individuals and teams with the skills to navigate diverse perspectives and achieve constructive outcomes. By understanding their own and others' conflict-handling styles, practitioners can foster open communication, enhance collaboration, and ultimately transform conflicts into opportunities for growth and innovation.

## About CHCI

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CHCI provides business solutions through “best and next” practices in strategic human capital management along with measurable, real-world strategies that support your organization to attract and retain high-performing people, build a diverse and inclusive workplace, and leverage individual and team performance throughout the enterprise. For more information, or if you have any questions, please contact Anne Loehr, Executive Vice President: [anneloehr@centerforhci.org](mailto:anneloehr@centerforhci.org) or (571) 970-4250, Ext. 113.

## Answer Key:

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1. **Accommodate/Compete.** *In this scenario, one person will have to accommodate, and the other person will have to compete, in order to meet the deadline. Then you'll have to work together quickly. You **could** compromise, but that is not the best available approach to this conflict. Why? Because compromising takes time, which you don't have.*
  
2. **Avoid/Compete.** *There are two options for handling this conflict. You either have to compete to get person to stop talking or avoid the situation entirely and put it in a parking lot for later. In this case, avoiding the conflict will avoid escalating the situation and further causing damage to the team.*
  
3. **Accommodate.** *This conflict situation is so bad that you will need to build trust amongst the team from scratch. To do this, accommodate by listening deeply and building relationships. Over time, practice all of the conflict modes, instead of just competing.*
  
4. **Compete.** *In order to get your ideas on your manager's radar and harness his attention, you will need to compete during the initial time together. After you've grabbed his attention, and he shares his ideas, move to compromise if you disagree with him.*