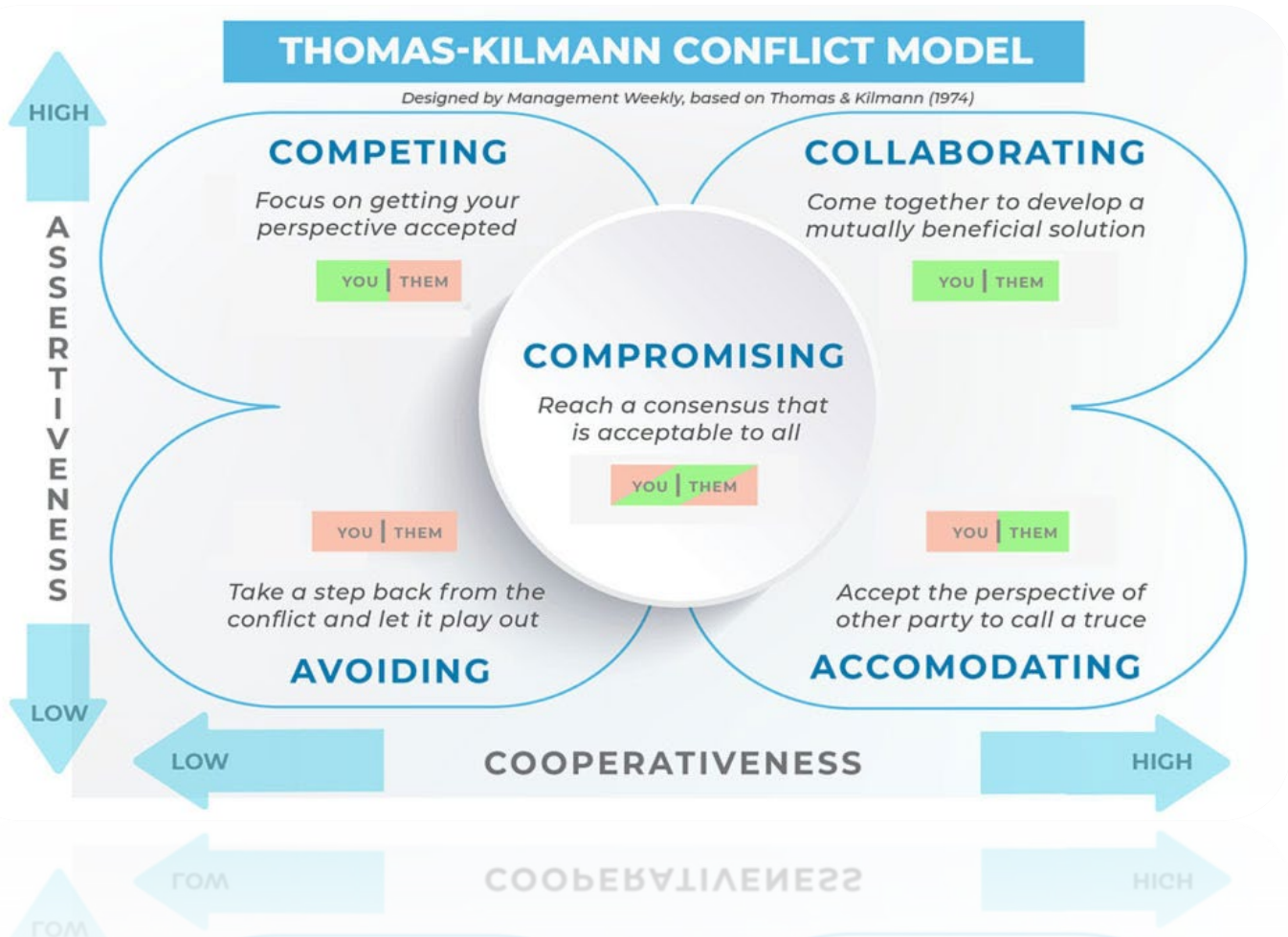


## Thomas Kilmann conflict model

The TKI assessment provides insight into an individual's typical response to conflict situations using one or more of five conflict-handling modes, or styles: competing, accommodating, avoiding, collaborating, and compromising. These modes reflect varying levels of assertiveness and cooperation.



The model has two approaches, also known as “dimensions”: assertiveness and cooperation. Most of you are probably intimately familiar with each of these dimensions on their own, as well as the associated personality traits, but not necessarily how they interact. That is where this model shines. There are five forms of conflict resolution that use these two approaches to different degrees. But more on this later.

The grid that forms the backbone of the model is a simple 2x2 design with an overlapping square in the center, much like a more involved Venn diagram. At the centre is the Compromising mode of conflict resolution. On the x-axis is cooperativeness, and on the y is assertiveness. The four other cells (besides the aforementioned Compromise) are as follows:

- High assertiveness and high cooperativeness: Collaboration
- High assertiveness and low cooperativeness: Competition
- Low assertiveness and high cooperation: Accommodation
- Low assertiveness and low cooperation: Avoidance

### **Thomas Kilmann Conflict Dimension One: Assertiveness**

We frequently get asked by individuals enrolled in our Team Leader Apprenticeship whether assertiveness is relevant and necessary – as it could be perceived as a counterproductive trait. However, assertiveness is the degree to which people are willing to take initiative and force their will upon others. This strategy is useful in the following situations:

- Results are needed fast
- Ethics or morality is in question
- You know you are correct and need to push forward
- Other attempts to resolve conflict are fruitless
- Your power and influence are significant.

Naturally, assertiveness often leads to faster resolution and reinforces power within the dominance hierarchy, but it can cause friction, backlash, and reinforce hierarchies that are too vertical or power-driven. It can also lower morale and autonomy among strong and equally disagreeable/assertive workers beneath you. It's best to be prudent, as always.

### **Thomas Kilmann Conflict Dimension Two: Cooperation**

As it sounds, cooperation is the degree to which people are willing to work together to accomplish a goal. It's all about teamwork and weighing different points of view, much like a democracy. Here are situations where cooperation may be superior to assertiveness:

- There is no clear-cut best way to handle the situation
- Your way may not be the right way.
- Your opponent/rival is not very disagreeable or is cooperative.
- Helps lower threat levels in the workplace and minimize your number of enemies.
- Works in every situation since you are giving up ground to a conflicting stance – however, it may not always be the RIGHT way.
- Cooperation has some advantages: it minimizes fallout and may enhance the worker or manager's reputation of being a diplomat and a people person.

However, it takes time to weigh all sides and come to agreements – time you may not have. Also, the more stubborn the other person or group is, the harder it will be to be cooperative – to the point where you may just waste your time. Know when to be assertive and when to be cooperative!

It should now be clear why there are different combinations of the two dimensions, as no single dimension can be useful for all situations. And remember: to implement this model and determine which dimension is best, you have to be able to successfully identify conflict within your own workplace.

### **Mode One: Avoiding**

At the low assertiveness and low compromising corner is the “avoiding” mode. As it sounds like, this involves avoiding conflict entirely. The person will watch the situation play itself out organically and try to avoid getting directly involved. It’s the typical passive approach that we see in our day-to-day lives more than ever before. Many people just want to avoid conflict, which certainly has its place, but it can also be a very toxic way to handle things. A business would fail if everyone avoided conflict – that’s just common sense!

Sometimes it’s good to avoid situations. Perhaps there was a huge blowup at work and the parties involved needed to relax for a while and focus on their tasks. Perhaps the issue is super minor or low priority, and the workers need to focus on more pressing concerns. Therefore, people weigh their options constantly.

People subconsciously perform a cost-benefit analysis and determine if the potential downsides of engaging in debate or conflict aren’t worth the potential gains. Most bystanders would naturally take this approach, but if a worker or employer needs to be engaged in conflict directly for the benefit of the business or their livelihood, then they’d be well advised to use this option as a last resort.

#### **Examples:**

If someone was talking about an issue at work with someone and they started to argue together, the first person would switch topics or leave.

A person who always avoids the topic of disciplining their employees might change the subject or try to avoid talking about it altogether. They might not want to even be around people when this topic is discussed.

### **Mode Two: Accommodating**

Also at the low assertiveness end, but with a higher degree of compromising baked within, is the accommodating option. This, as it sounds, involves acquiescing to the rival/other individuals and giving in to their stance. Sometimes we must “take the loss” and accept that we should change our ways or yield to the other parties. Unlike avoiding, this mode acknowledges the conflict and puts an end to any tension. This is very useful if you are directly involved in the conflict but don’t want to deal with the situation – or if your way is proven wrong.

Keep in mind that a person choosing this strategy may lose a lot of reputation or favor if they were the aggressor. Be very careful about taking this if your position is strong and you have a lot to lose – both within the conflict and the greater context of the organization.

#### **Examples:**

If a co-worker has to skip work due to unavoidable circumstance, the person would agree to cover their shift even if they are not friends with their co-worker.

If a project needs completing they may do “whatever it takes” to make this happen.

### **Mode Three: Competing**

High assertiveness and low compromising is the classic mode of competition. The workplace is full of competitive people, sure, but in the context of conflict resolution, competing means people openly dissent against the other party and directly try to prove that their way is right. This is the classic debate or argumentative stance: “my way or the highway,” so to speak. It’s for pressing matters or situations where you need to assert your authority – or if you know you’re right and the stakes are high. If you have the authority and it’s an emergency, don’t hesitate to make others bend to your will.

Just be careful about employing this strategy excessively because it can lead to massive blowback. The more competitive you are, the less likely people will be to work with you in the future, and the more likely they will shut you out of the loop as much as possible. If you elevate your threat level too needlessly, people may target your reputation or even your livelihood. Be sure that your reasoning is strong.

#### **Examples:**

Someone would rather be right than do the right thing! They might want to just win the argument!

A person gets too defensive about their ideas or opinions and becomes combative when facing objections or disagreements.

### **Mode Four: Collaborating**

Let’s say you want an assertive option that is still highly accommodating. That’s where collaborating comes into play. In a nutshell, the collaborating mode allows you to acknowledge your rival’s points and take the time to agree. This is indeed very time-consuming and resource-intensive, but it can be a great way to handle an issue if both sides have good points and there’s no clear-cut winner in the conflict. A lot of great things come out of collaborating, but it can be a strain on resources and slow everything down. It’s usually the right way, but not always.

A lot of creativity can come out of collaborations. The power of many people bouncing ideas off each other is huge. Of course, all parties must have some degree of assertiveness – otherwise, the other person is simply acquiescing and not providing constructive inputs. Be assertive but don’t dominate the collaboration or else there’s no point. It’s also important to question whether you should collaborate with someone you don’t trust – they may stall the process at your expense or steal your ideas, for instance.

**Examples:**

If a person is offended by an idea but can see that there are implications for other people, then the person will work with them to come up with alternative solutions that are mutually agreed upon.

If someone is saddled with too much work, they will discuss the issue with their employers and try to find a middle ground instead of resigning.

**Mode Five: Compromising**

Here's the center of everything on the Thomas Kilmann Conflict Model. Compromising is all about being somewhat assertive and cooperative – giving up a lot of ground and gaining a little bit. The saying "A Good Compromise Leaves Nobody Fully Satisfied" is true, but it's often better than the alternative.

Collaborating is a solid choice in most situations (unless there's a sense of urgency) because you'll spend more time coming up with the "right" answer, not one that leaves everyone in limbo. Compromising in the short run can lead to additional conflict in the long run, but it will put a Band-Aid on the situation in the interim. This is the even-keeled approach.

Overall, compromising is often used to resolve heated conflict but not to the point where people are grandstanding. It's an everyday solution – common in democracies – that is often revised many times over the subsequent years. Don't fall into the habit of compromising all of the time when collaborating would be far more gainful.

**Examples:**

Two companies might cooperate on marketing efforts when they both want more customers.

If your boss is offering you a raise, but you don't want to give up too much of your salary, you can say that you would be willing to compromise.

**Which Thomas Kilmann Conflict Mode Works Best?**

There is no catch-all situation. Each mode has its strengths and weaknesses and will be a solid choice in certain situations. There are so many variables in play here, including but not limited to:

Personality traits of everyone involved (you, your rivals, the managers, customers, other workers, and so forth): some people respond well to disagreeability, but others don't. Some people can't be disagreeable at ALL and would struggle with the assertiveness dimension. Others may only avoid situations, forcing you to take a more assertive approach to resolve the conflict. There are so many situations, and no manager can be perfect at predicting the personalities of everyone in a business.

Your hierarchical position: more power means more influence and more responsiveness toward assertive tendencies, and vice versa.

The problem itself: if there's a sense of urgency, you'll need to be more assertive to ensure that the problem gets resolved faster. If it's not a big issue, the "juice may not be worth the squeeze" and you may even want to consider avoiding it entirely.

Interpersonal relationships: if you have a strong relationship with the other side of the conflict, you may want to pick a more cooperative solution. If they are a highly disagreeable rival, you may want to be less cooperative. Even still, perhaps you can treat the conflict as an opportunity to mend fences or win a rival's trust, so you may want to be cooperative after all. Even AI can't properly determine the right mode to use in all situations.

### Conclusion & Additional Help

The workplace is a complex jungle of sticky situations, and this conflict model is simply a tool to help organise ideas and come up with a game plan for bushwhacking through it. Like all tools, it's not foolproof: it's just designed to aid us in the difficult job of resolving conflict and managing our fellow complex humans. Of course, the Thomas Kilmann Conflict Instrument is only one tool in your arsenal as manager or supervisor.

