

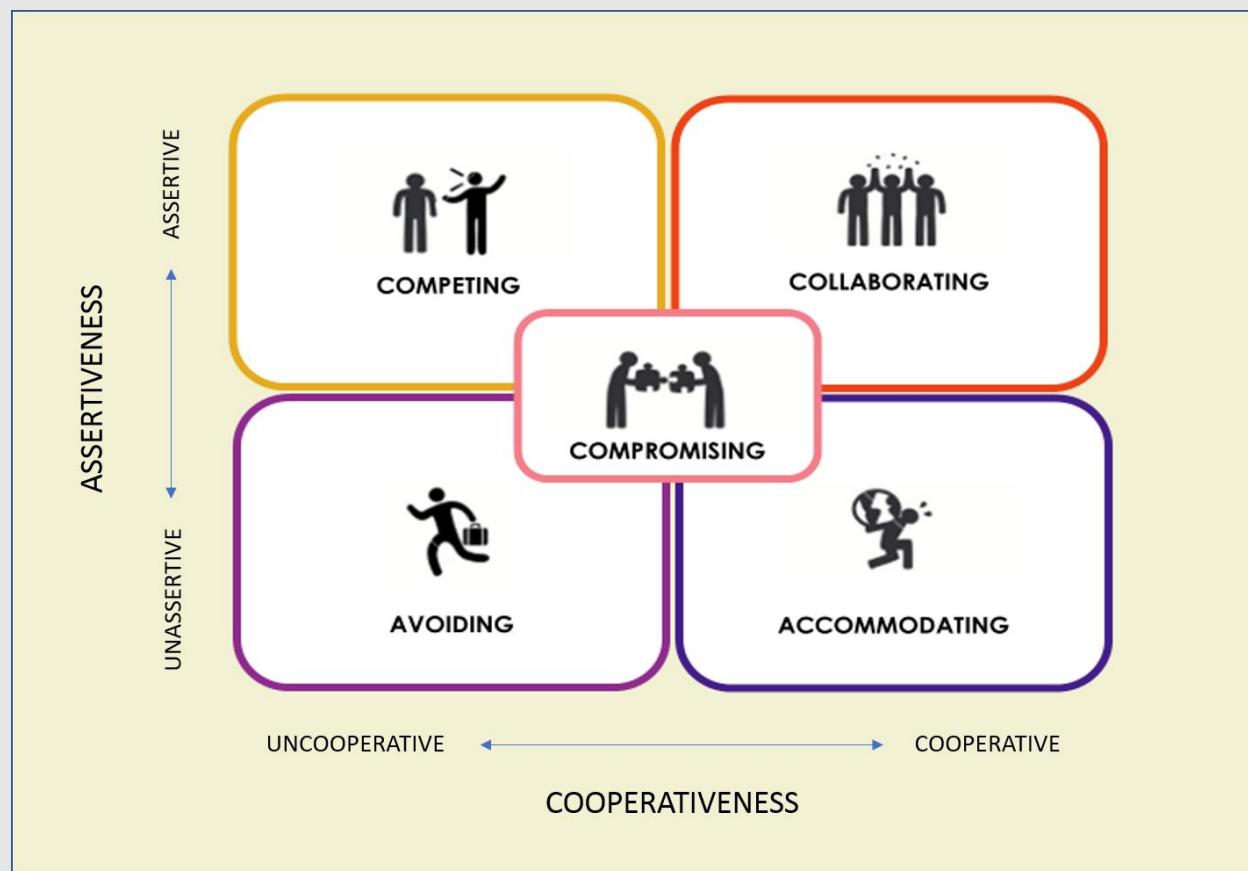
Conflict Management Styles for HR Professionals

We recently attended three SHRM state and regional conferences in PA, NJ and DE, where we asked visitors at our booth to select their preferred conflict management style from five choices: Competing, Collaborating, Avoiding, Accommodating or Compromising. They simply placed a push-pin in a poster of the diagram from the well-known tool – “Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument,” otherwise known as TKI. Our version of the diagram is shown below, as adapted from the tool.

What’s Your Conflict Style?

Conflict is a natural part of our interactions with others. Understanding your natural tendency can help you improve relationships, both at home and at work.

Put a pin in the style you use most often at work.



Survey Results

Over 200 people took part in our informal survey. As you might anticipate, collaborating was the winner, with the runner-up being compromising. In this paper we have outlined the purpose and features of the five conflict styles, along with hints about how to use the most effective style in any situation. Skilled conflict facilitators use all five as tools when needed.

Why Is Collaborating So Hard to Do?

Most of us try to collaborate in conflict situations, but it is often hard to reach true collaboration. This was demonstrated by over forty participants who placed their pins on the border-line between collaborating and compromising. They explained that they wanted to collaborate, but organizational politics and business demands often forced them to compromise, instead.

One of their principal problems was lack of time. Building highly supportive relationships demands a lot of time and effort, whereas being competitive, accommodating, and avoiding are relatively quick and easy, even though the long-term results are not as productive.

The journey to collaboration demands determination and belief in the desired outcome. Emotions are more intense and are displayed more openly during collaborative efforts than with any other style. You must be prepared to handle those emotions. Communicating clear goals and being persistent in your quest will help achieve “wins” for all parties.

- Hints for Collaborating

At first glance, you would think that collaborating is the perfect conflict style. However, if the collaborator discusses the issues in too much depth, or his/her behavior does not elicit collaborative responses from others, you should encourage the collaborator to think about why people are not fully engaged with the issue.

Collaborators tend to be highly committed to their cause and may override people who are not as enthusiastic about the cause as they are. Encourage collaborators to succinctly explain their positions – ask them to listen closely to other people’s points-of-view and demonstrate their understanding of those perspectives. They may find that a less demanding approach such as compromising, delivers moderate progress rather than none, thus providing a new starting point and an opportunity to return to collaboration.

Comprising Is Not Giving In...It’s Bringing In

HR professionals endeavoring to resolve conflict should aim toward collaborating whenever possible. However, they should be prepared to fall back to a compromise position if people are competing for mutually exclusive goals. You can accomplish this tactical move by being somewhat less assertive in your demands and being less cooperative with the other parties. A compromise is a much better end-result than the unhappy win-lose or lose-lose result derived from a bitter competition.

- Hints for Compromising

If you want another party to be more willing to compromise, encourage them to assert themselves by explaining their needs and wants in greater depth and to share the information with everyone involved. Encourage them to be more assertive for their own needs and to be cooperative with other stakeholders by working diligently on common problems, so everyone feels they have been treated fairly.

What Is the Difference Between Collaborating and Compromising?

Collaboration is a powerful tool that tends to produce very good results by merging the different insights of all the parties involved. Everyone tends to be committed to the outcome. For collaboration to work effectively, you will need to be both very assertive in achieving your goals, as well as actively helping everyone else attain their goals, too. This style has been referred to as “making the pie bigger. “

Compromising when resources are limited, is “sharing the pie” by dividing it into acceptable sized pieces, so that everyone gets something they desire. This style may suit your needs if you have moderately important goals, or need to reach a temporary settlement for a complex issue. You must be willing to split the outcome of the negotiations into parts that deliver at least the minimum value required by each stakeholder.

Avoiding Can Be Productive

A few people selected “Avoiding” as their preferred conflict management style. They said they keep their heads down, or give in to the demands of others, especially the demands of colleagues who are competitive, or who have a higher-level position in the organization.

It can be a good idea for people to avoid conflict in the short-term by deflecting, or not engaging with other people who may be angry and uncooperative. Even skilled facilitators use avoidance sometimes, so that they don’t become involved in situations where they will lose influence by being drawn in, as combatants in a turmoil. They keep quiet, but listen intently for an opportunity to intervene in the conflict, so they can help bridge understanding between the parties.

Unfortunately, avoidance can be detrimental if used extensively, over time. Unengaged people tend to become fearful and do not contribute to solving problems. By avoiding stressful discussions, people may also not share important information with the group.

- Hints for Avoiding

People often use avoidance to disengage from others when they fear the consequences of being more assertive, or are disinterested in an issue. In many cases, their involvement may be essential for an issue to be resolved. If the underlying cause of avoidance is fear, provide them with “protection” by demonstrating openly that you value their ideas. Encourage them to contribute solutions to the problem.

One way to get avoiders to start participating is to ask them for small contributions. Summarize what they tell you and check your understanding of the concept. Thank them for their help and try to include some, if not all, of their ideas in the outcome. On the other hand, if the person is disinterested you may have to “sell” them on the importance of their contribution. You will probably need to work on gaining their commitment before they will contribute productively.

Accommodating Is Often Undervalued

Accommodating others can be useful in some situations. “Going with the flow” may facilitate teamwork when the team is working within tight timelines to achieve an important goal, but again, like avoiding, it will lead to less engagement and lower productivity if used extensively. Accommodating is a form of complying with the status quo. Long-term use of this style tends to develop a culture where, for the greater benefit of the organization, new ideas and challenges are discouraged. While accommodating will increase team cohesiveness, it will lessen innovation.

One way to apply this style is to demonstrate that you accept another person’s point of view by showing you can work with their proposal and demonstrating how you will support it. By building strong relationships with the other party, you show that you value them and their ideas. Accommodating can strengthen relationships and provide the foundation for collaboration.

-Hints for Accommodating

People who frequently accommodate others in conflict situations put a lot of energy into building and sustaining relationships. Consequently, they don’t always focus sufficiently on accomplishing the task at hand.

You may wish to encourage such a person to be more assertive in presenting their ideas about solving the issue. Encourage the accommodator to speak up for themselves rather focusing on supporting other people. They are skilled at helping others to feel comfortable, but at the expense of their own needs. Ask them to present two or three things they want from the discussion and then explain how those ideas can be incorporated into the solution in a way that helps them, as well as other people.

People who accommodate can also take on more work that they should. If you know you’re working with someone like this, be cognizant of their current workload and try not to overburden them. On the other hand, if you are the one who accommodates others too frequently, practice saying “No” to small requests, so you can learn to turn down larger requests when you really need to.

Competing Can Be a Winner...Sometimes

Competing is an essential conflict management style if there is an emergency or only one legitimate approach is possible. The down-side of competition is that it leads to one party

winning their position at the cost of other people feeling excluded from the process. People who feel excluded do not tend to engage with, or enthusiastically support initiatives. If they feel like “losers” they may become alienated and even actively sabotage the process. A win-lose outcome is fine for a sports match but not for sustaining ongoing working relationships. Reach out to the losing party, showing how you can work together to achieve a common goal and build bridges to the future. Competitors can then move toward accommodating or compromising as potential partners.

While only a few HR professionals at the conferences selected the “Competing” style as their most common one at work, we believe from our experience, it is used more often in HR work than people imagine.

- Hints for Competing

Dealing productively with competitors is often difficult. Asking them to cooperate more with others is not likely to be successful. A better approach is to show them how to “compete” for win-win outcomes. The result is better for them in the long-term; they achieve results, gain support, and their status is enhanced. This kind of experience can leave them more open to collaborating in the future.

Summary

Conflict resolution is a key skill for HR professionals because the potential for conflict is present whenever people disagree about how work will be performed, or resources allocated to a project or process.

HR professionals should develop conflict resolution skills to facilitate group work and ensure that teams work harmoniously. Completing the TKI and learning about your conflict style profile is an excellent starting point before learning conflict resolution techniques and tools. Your profile will provide you with a blueprint to determine which styles you need to strengthen, so you can use the best one for each situation.

About Us

We train employees at all levels, to manage conflict individually and within groups, to build and sustain positive and productive relationships.



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