# Essentials

Conflict

Most strategic decisions are not made without some disagreement – from simple differences of opinion to loud arguments. The key to making good decisions is to consider different points of view and the downside risks in a collegial atmosphere where expressions of doubt and fact-based analysis can be aired.

*"Every good business story has a conflict and triumph at the core and a turning point where a transformation takes place."* - Dinesh Paliwal

This often does not happen for fear of conflict. Conflict is a fact of life in groups of people. It is simply the condition in which the concerns of different people – things they care about – appear incompatible. It occurs when two conditions exist -interdependence and differences:
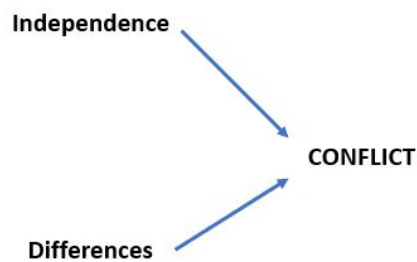


\* from, *introduction to Conflict and Teams: Enhancing Team Performance Using the TKI* by Kenneth W. Thomas and Gail Fann Thomas, , CPP, Inc., 2007.

Interdependence exists when members need to work together to satisfy their concerns. Independence is high when decisions to be made affect all members.
Differences exist when members have varying responsibilities, values, temperament, information and/or experience. With more differences, members bring more diverse concerns.

*"When human beings live together, conflict is inevitable."* - Daisaku Ikeda

Conflict is not good or bad in itself; it has the potential for both positive and negative outcomes.

*"Conflict comes from a conflict of good ideas."* – Donatella Versace

Positive outcomes result when the differences create an opportunity for richer understanding of an issue. The key is the handling of the differences – the conflict handling modes used by the group. Negative outcomes result when differences are not reconciled. Such outcomes often result in poor decisions, deadlocks or no decision. Such conflicts can waste a groups time and energy, lead to discouragement and apathy. For fear of negative outcomes and/or personal attacks, many people avoid conflict.

Conflict is actually a continuum:
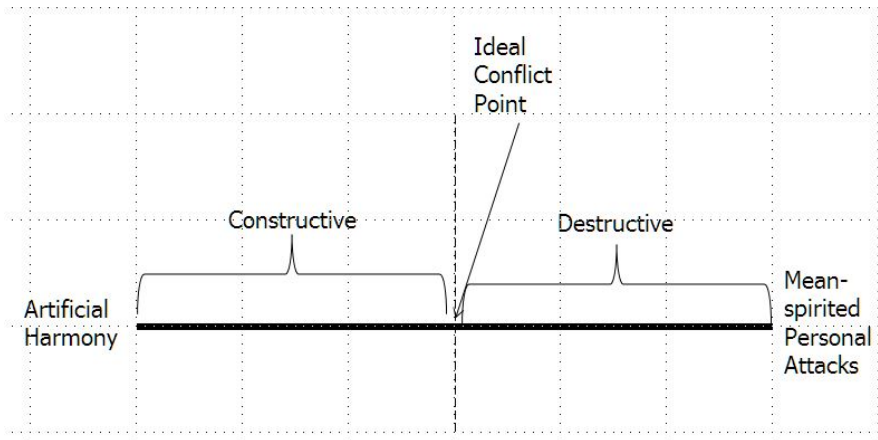
Theoretically, the best place on the continuum is close to the middle. This is a point where a group is having productive debate without slipping into destructive territory. Even the best teams will occasionally step over the line. This is actually a good thing as long as the team is committed to working through it.

*"Conflict cannot survive without your participation."* - Wayne Dyer

In the heart of conflict automatic thoughts are put into our heads, no matter how irrational. These thoughts can lead to destructive responses such as arguing, gossiping/complaining about someone, belittling, being hypercritical, caving in, overpowering, defensiveness, passive aggression, dismissing others opinions, revenge, being overly dramatic, sabotage, exaggeration, sarcasm, exclusion, stonewalling, finger-pointing, or withdrawal.



\* from, *Everything DiSC Productive Conflict,* John Wiley & Sons, 2017.

Key is to learn how to take a step back from the situation and make a productive response instead. Each time a team recovers from an incident of destructive conflict, it builds confidence that it can survive such an event, which builds trust. Trust, as we learned in our leadership posts is the foundation of creating a cohesive leadership team that is able to have productive debate, make decisions and commitments to one another, and hold one another accountable to results.

Creativity, trust, and higher performance are possible outcomes of productive conflict. In order to teach a team to engage in productive conflict, it is important to understand everyone's viewpoints on and comfort levels with conflict as they can be radically different. Some people are comfortable screaming and shouting while others shutdown. A person's conflict style is determined by a number of factors – temperament, cultural background, and family norms.

One of the best ways to understand your own and others conflict profile is to use a profiling tool such as Myers-Biggs (MBTI) or Everything DiSC, both of which address how an individual's style reacts under stress.
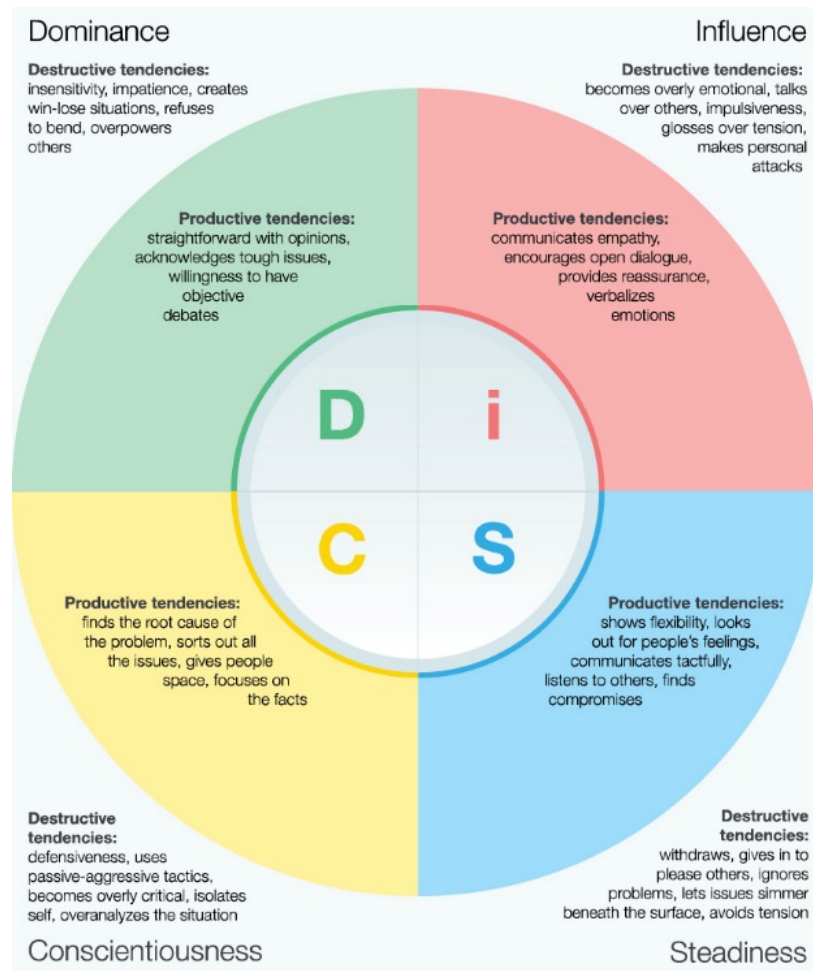


In addition, there is an instrument focused solely on identifying your conflict mode, the Thomas-Kilmann Instrument (TKI).

The TKI assesses an individual's behavior in conflict situations along two basic dimensions 1) assertiveness – the extent to which an individual attempts to satisfy own concerns (importance of task) and 2) cooperativeness – extent to which individual attempts to satisfy other person's concern (importance of relationship). These two dimensions of behavior are used to define five conflict-handling modes as shown below:

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                            │ COMPETING                COLLABORATING     │
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**COMPETING**

**Imposing or dictating a decision**
"Sorry, Bob, but that's my decision as your supervisor."
**Arguing for a conclusion that fits your data**
"Our sales show a steady decline. We need to redesign the product."
**Hard bargaining (making no concessions)**
"I won't take less than $50,000. Take it or leave it."

**COLLABORATING**

**Reconciling interests through a win-win solution**
"You need us to fund Project X, but I need Project Y. How can we do both?"
**Combining insights into a richer understanding**
"You're praising Sally's technical skills, but I'm criticizing her interpersonal difficulties. Both are true, aren't they? She has high potential if she can improve those interpersonal skills."

**COMPROMISING**

**Soft bargaining (exchanging concessions)**
"Let's split the difference and settle for $45,000."
**Taking turns**
"Suppose I pay this time and you pick up the tab next time?"
**Moderating your conclusions**
"You think he's outstanding, but I think he's average. Suppose we say 'above average'?"

**AVOIDING**

**Avoiding people you find troublesome**
"If Fred calls, I'm not in."
**Avoiding issues that are unimportant, complex, or dangerous**
"Maybe. We'll see. Let's move along to the next topic."
**Postponing discussion until later**
"Let me check with Accounting and get back to you next week."

**ACCOMMODATING**

**Doing a favor to help someone**
"I can see this is important to you. OK."
**Being persuaded**
"I didn't think of that. You're right."
**Obeying an authority**
"I'd do it differently, but it's your call."
**Deferring to another's expertise**
"You're the expert. I'll trust your judgment."
**Appeasing someone who is dangerous**
"OK, OK. Just calm down."

ASSERTIVENESS — Assertive / Unassertive

COOPERATIVENESS — Uncooperative ← → Cooperative

**Competing** is assertive and uncooperative, a power-oriented mode. The individual pursues own concerns at others expense using whatever power seems appropriate to win their position. Competing might mean standing up for your rights, standing up for a position you believe is correct or simply trying to win. Best used when quick, decisive action is warranted, such as in an emergency, or when an unpopular course of action is needed (for example, cost-cutting, protect self from others taking advantage).

**Collaborating** is both assertive and cooperative. The individual attempts to work with others to find a solution that fully satisfies concerns of both. This typically involves digging into an issue to identify underlying concerns to find out what meets both sets of concerns. Best used when need to find an integrative solution and the concerns of all parties are too important to be compromised. Use when the objective is to learn and wish to test assumptions to understand other perspectives.

**Compromising** is both assertive and cooperative. The objective is to find an expedient, mutually acceptable solution that at least partially satisfies both parties – a middle ground. As shown in the graphic above, Compromising is between Competing and Accommodating – giving up more than competing, but less than accommodating. Works best when goals are moderately important, but not worth effort or potential disruption using more assertive modes.

**Avoiding** is unassertive and uncooperative. The individual does not immediately pursue own concerns or those of others; does not address the conflict. This may take the form of diplomatically side-stepping the issue, postponing the issue or simply withdrawing from the situation. Works best when the issue is unimportant or there are other issues more pressing or when sense no chance of satisfying own concerns or when potential costs outweigh the benefits or when nee to let people cool down, or when gathering more information outweighs advantage of an immediate decision or when the issue is symptomatic of another, larger issue.

**Accommodating** is unassertive and cooperative, the opposite of Competing. The individual neglects own concerns to satisfy concerns of others, selfless generosity, or to obey an order when would prefer not to, yielding one's point of view to another. Works when you realize you are wrong to allow a better solution to be considered, when an issue is more important to other person than to you, when preserving harmony and avoiding disruption are important, or when want to allow employees to experiment and learn from their mistakes.

There are no right or wrong modes. All five are useful in some situations and part of the work of leaders. The effectiveness of a given mode depends on the specific situation and skills with which you use it. The work of leaders is three-fold: Craft a Vision, Build Alignment, and Champion Execution. As we learned in early posts on leadership, behaviors effective for Crafting a Vision include remaining open and speaking out. Remaining open has elements of being cooperative – understanding the concerns and perspectives of others, requiring Compromising or Accommodating conflict modes. Speaking out, on the other hand, is more assertive, making sure your concerns and perspective are heard and understood, requiring a Competing, Collaborating or Compromising conflict mode. Behaviors for Building Alignment include exchanging perspectives and being receptive, both of which have elements of cooperation and may demand Compromising, or Accommodating conflict modes. Behaviors for Championing Execution include driven, initiating action, and addressing problems, all of which are more assertive and may require a Competing, Collaborating or Compromising conflict mode on the part of the leader. There may also be times in which a leader must test assumptions and offer praise when employees take a risk and fail, in which case Accommodating or Avoiding conflict modes may be appropriate.

**Crucial Conversations**

One-on-one conversations can lead to dramatic improvements in organizational performance if people learn and practice skills to master high-stakes "crucial conversations."

*Crucial conversation: a discussion between two or more people where (1) stakes are high, (2) opinions vary, and (3) emotions run strong.*

When faced with a crucial conversation, we can do one of three things:

- *Avoid it (Stay Mute)*
- *Face it and handle it poorly*
- *Face it and handle it well*

Unfortunately, at the heart of many organizations lie crucial conversations that are not being held or are not being handled well. Research proves this behavior results in injury and death, higher costs, less trust and more stress. So how do you master crucial conversations?

First, is the open and honest flow of relevant information, even when the ideas and feelings are controversial or unpopular. This type of dialog creates a "shared pool of meaning" in which both individuals are exposed to accurate relevant information; more accurate information leads to better decisions, unity and commitment to the decision. To create a safe environment for this type of dialog to occur, we must first start with heart, the right motives and focus. Know what you really want and stick with it. Without this clarity and focus, the conversation can take a sudden and unconscious turn and start looking for ways to win, punish or keep the peace, none of which result in improvement. Winning drives us away from healthy dialog, punishing moves us to wanting to harm the other person, and keeping the peace moves us to accept the certainty of bad results to avoid the possibility of an uncomfortable conversation. When his happens, you need to refocus your brain by asking yourself some questions that will return you to dialog:

- What do I really want for myself?
- What do I want for others?
- What do I want for the relationship?

And, take control of your body. By introducing complex, abstract questions, the brain recognizes you are now dealing with intricate social issues and not physical threats that require adrenaline and you can focus on the behaviors needed to get what you really want. Once you have done this, you can ask tougher questions that turn either/or choices (Fool's Choices) into a search for new choices, the ever elusive AND. Look for the and by identifying what you really want and what you really don't want and then combine the two.

Second, notice when safety is at risk - when people are caught up in the content of the conversation and become blind to the conditions of how people are feeling and acting. Watch for physical signals - raised voice, pointing fingers, silence, moving away, withdrawal, labelling, attacking. Use these as signals that the other person is feeling unsafe. Also look for these signals in your own behavior. When you notice these signals, step out of the conversation and make it safe by apologizing if you have violated the other's respect, fixing a misunderstanding or creating a mutual purpose. When safety is restored, continue the dialog.

When you have a tough message to share or are so convinced of your own rightness that you may push too hard, state your path:

- Share your facts- least controversial, most persuasive element from your plan
- Tell your story -explain why you conclude the message
- Ask for the other's path -encourage the other to share ·both facts and stories
- Talk tentatively -state story as a story, don't disguise it as a fact
- Encourage testing -make it safe for others to express differing or opposing views.

When others have turned to silence or violence, LISTEN:

- Ask -show interest in the other person's views
- Mirror -acknowledge the other's emotions

- Paraphrase- restate what you have heard, show you understand what they have shared and that it is safe to share

*"One of the best ways to persuade others is with your ears – by listening to them."*
-Dean Rusk

When sharing, remember to

- Agree when you share common views
- Build on shared views
- Compare views when your views differ; do not suggest others are wrong.

When a decision has been reached, determine who does what by when and set a follow-up time. Record the commitments and follow-up at the agreed time. Hold one another accountable to agreements.

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