

Technique 42: The Thomas–Kilman Conflict Mode Instrument

Variants/Aliases

This is also known as the **Thomas–Kilman Instrument (TKI)** or the **Thomas–Kilman conflict model**.

Description of the Technique

The Thomas–Kilman conflict mode instrument sets out five positions that may be adopted by people in a conflict or negotiation situation. These five positions represent alternative preferences individuals have when dealing with such situations. This model is shown in Figure 3.10.

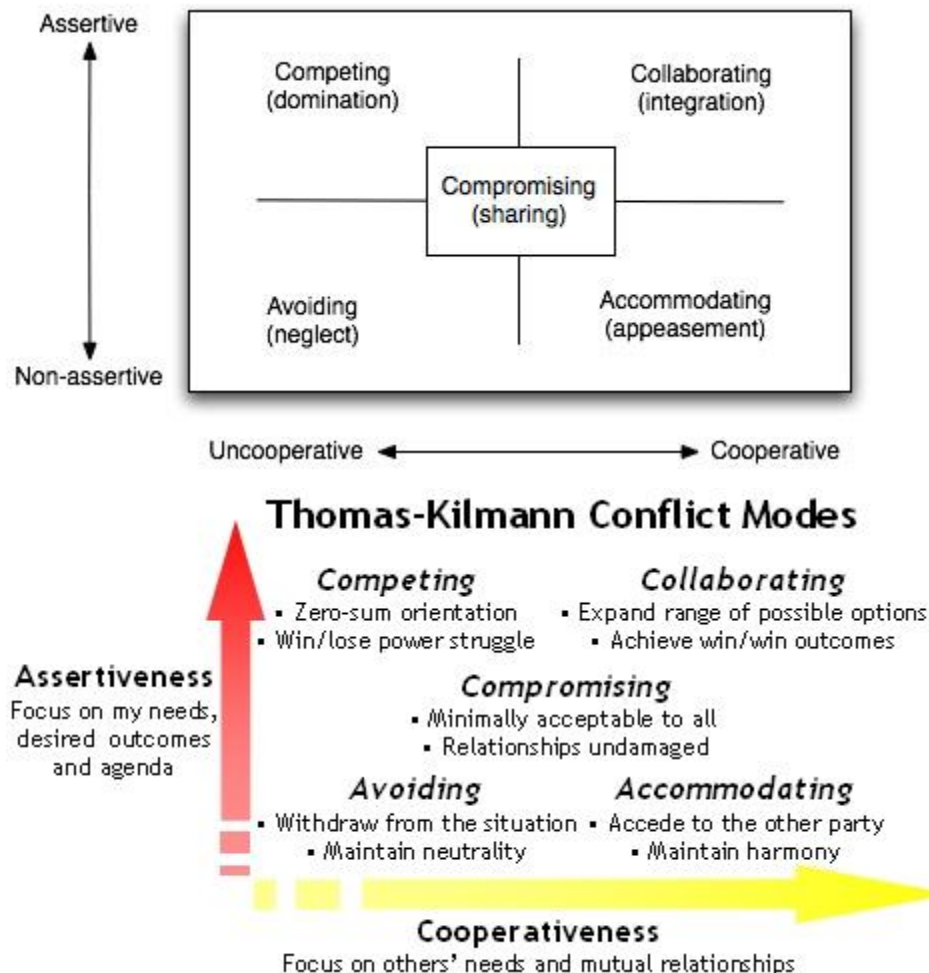


Figure 3.10: Thomas–Kilman conflict mode instrument

The five positions represent the following approaches:

Avoiding: Unassertive and uncooperative. This stance is based upon a refusal to acknowledge that a conflict exists, often in the hope that if ignored the situation will resolve itself. This can be appropriate in minor situations, but where another stakeholder

feels there is a genuine issue, anyone taking this stance may be perceived to be awkward and to be failing to address the issue. People taking an avoiding position may also build up resentment because they have repressed their concerns; ultimately, this could lead to a more serious conflict, sometimes over a trivial issue.

Accommodating: Unassertive and cooperative. In this position stakeholders have acknowledged their concerns and the existence of the conflict, but have decided to give way to the ideas or requests from other parties. People taking an accommodating position may be content with this approach, but might feel sometimes that their voices are unheard, even when they make good suggestions. A history of accommodating can exacerbate this situation, such that they are habitually ignored by the other stakeholders.

Competing: Assertive and uncooperative. Stakeholders who adopt a competing position are keen to focus on their own ideas and concerns and may pay little attention to the other stakeholders' needs. Sometimes this is an effective way to deal with a situation, but it is likely to cause resentment in the long term.

Compromising: Moderately assertive and moderately cooperative. This is often the approach that people recommend – meeting all parties in the middle. However, some stakeholders, particularly those with a competing preference, do not like compromise since it means giving ground on some issues. One view of compromise is that everybody loses, although a more positive view is that everyone gains something. Compromise is often an effective approach to resolving conflicts or negotiations but it is important that everyone feels content with the result. If this is not the case, then resentments can fester in the longer term.

Collaborating: Assertive and cooperative. Sometimes known as the 'win, win' scenario, collaboration is the ideal outcome to a situation, since all participants feel that the result is beneficial for them. Creative suggestions that provide alternatives to those put forward by the stakeholders can provide the basis for collaborative solutions. However, it is not always possible to achieve this, and in such situations a compromise may be the best outcome that can be achieved.

Using the Thomas–Kilmann Instrument

Some stakeholders believe that there are only two positions to be taken when negotiating or in a conflict: the 'soft' approach, where you can't win and so give in to your opponent, and the 'hard' approach where you concede little, if anything. The Thomas–Kilmann approach sets out three other possible positions, and helps to encourage participants to consider other options that might provide a route to

consensus. Positioning the avoiding, collaboration and compromise approaches so clearly adds alternatives to the two extreme positions and can form an excellent starting point for debate. Merely opening up the discussion can sometimes provide a softening of firm positions, which is usually helpful when seeking consensus or compromise alternatives.

In some situations the Thomas–Kilmann model can be a useful way of assessing the significance of the issue under discussion and deciding whether there is more to be gained by agreeing on a proposed solution or by spending time finding an outcome agreeable to all. If the issue is minor it might be resolved over time, and an avoidance position could be the best approach. If one stakeholder feels very strongly about a particular point of view and the others are less concerned, it may be easier to allow that stakeholder to carry the day. It could bring other advantages in the future if someone has been allowed a ‘win’ in one situation.