



Managing Conflict

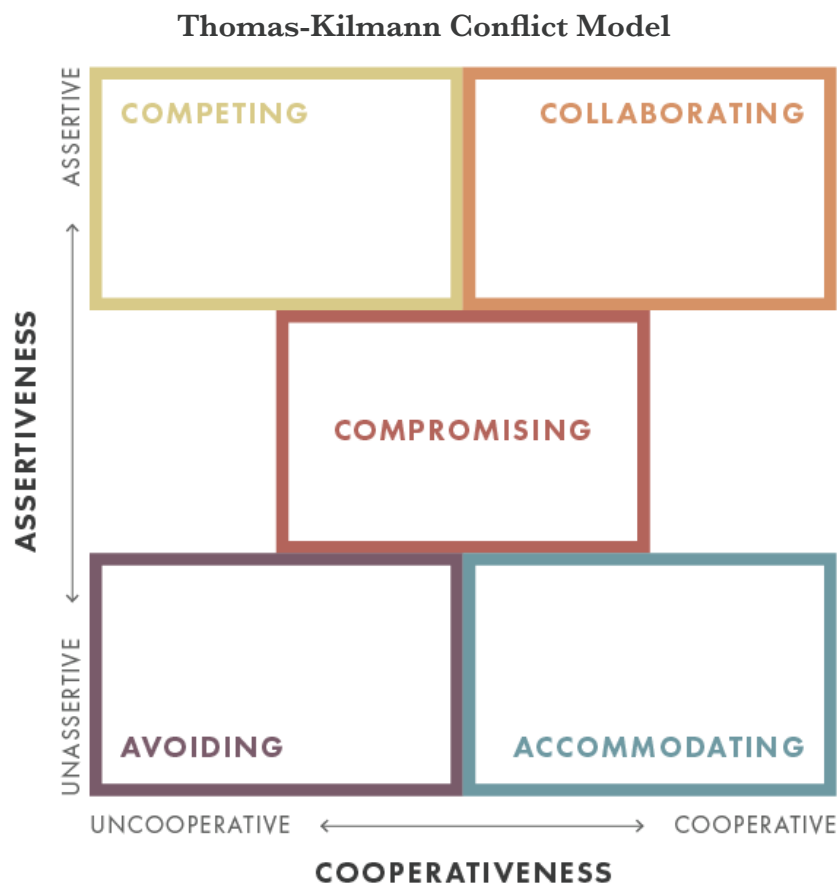
Conflict is a natural byproduct of humans interacting together. Seldom do we want exactly the same thing or hold the same expectations as someone else. Many people experience conflict as a high-stress experience with the accompanying physical symptoms such as a pounding heart, shutting down the ability to think, and loss of emotional stability.

If conflict is a fearful or difficult situation for you, consider building your awareness and skills in this area. Transforming the negative energy of conflict into something more helpful almost always results in an increase in personal and organizational power.

One of the best-known tools for thinking about conflict is the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument. (View a [Link to brief overview](#) and a short [video](#) explaining the instrument).

This instrument proposes five ways that can be adopted in conflict: competing, accommodating, avoiding, collaborating, or compromising. Each method can be appropriate in some situations and not in others. (See diagram below).

Each method is the result of different degrees of two dimensions: assertiveness and cooperativeness. In this model, based on decades of research and validation, collaboration requires a high degree of both assertiveness and cooperativeness.



([Link to brief overview](#) and a short [video](#) explaining the instrument)



Assertiveness is the ability to speak up for ourselves in an honest and respectful way while respecting the rights and feelings of others. It differs from competing and aggression as communication styles, which often ignore or violate the rights and needs of others.

Examples of assertive communication:

- » When it's important to let someone know how you feel, use an "I" message in this format:
"When you (behavior), I feel _____, and the result is _____."
- » When we can say no without feeling guilty
"That sounds like a wonderful opportunity, but I'm not available for that."
- » When you have an opinion and can share it confidently when you think or feel differently from others
"I'd like to share how I see it. It seems to me that . . . How do you see it?"
- » Having good eye contact when communicating with others
- » Keeping your posture open and relaxed

Assertive communication uses "I messages" rather than blaming or complaining about others.

For example, say, *"I seem to have missed that email"* **instead of** *"You didn't send me that email."*

Another example is saying, *"I felt let down"* **instead of** *"That's not what you said when we first spoke."*

Often when we are too accommodating to others, we build inner resentment, which can later sabotage the relationship. Instead of immediately responding with "yes" when you receive a request, more assertive responses would be:

- » *"Let me think about that and give you an answer _____."*
- » *"Sorry, I can't do x, but I could do y if that would be helpful."*

Over time, assertiveness builds trust because people know that you are truthful about your own needs.

Cooperativeness is the intention and act of working together willingly for a common purpose or benefit. It is the degree to which someone is willing to satisfy the needs of others.

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Examples of cooperative communication:

- » *"Let's be sure that everyone has had a chance to weigh in on this question. Who hasn't had the opportunity to speak yet?"*
- » *"Jane, I know you wanted x, and I was only able to do y at the time. Is there anything else I can do to help you get x?"*
- » Instead of *"Why in the world would you say that?"* a cooperative statement might be *"Tell me more about that. How did you come to that opinion?"*
- » *"It looks like I won't be able to get that report finished until x. How will that affect your deadline?"*



Other best practices for managing conflict:

- » Address conflicts as soon as they arise, speaking calmly and objectively about what you're seeing.
- » Cultivate a “tell me more” attitude of curiosity and openness.
- » Shift out of “attack and defend” mode by exploring (in writing if you can):
 1. What is it that you fear in this situation? Usually, we have an inner critic that sends us fear-based messages.
 2. Redirect your attention to look for the strengths and assets you are bringing to the situation.
 3. Look for what you value about the other person(s).
 4. Ask “What could be the opportunity, lesson, or gift in this situation?”
- » Take full accountability for your own actions rather than looking for blame or getting defensive.
- » Look for interests and positions. We can get stuck in positions: an outcome that we must have, one solution, narrowly defined. For example, you may have a *position* that Program X must include six components. *Interests* are underlying reasons behind a particular position. Interests are more flexible than positions.

For example, you may have an interest in creating a new program about financial wellness, but you're open to what must be included. Identifying our own interests and drawing out the interests of others is a collaborative way of moving attention to possibilities for a win-win solution to a well-defined conflict. To learn more, watch this [video summary of the classic book *Getting to Yes*](#) by Fisher and Ury.

The area of managing conflict is a good topic for sustained focus, reflection, and experimentation in safe settings. With practice, you will be able to rewire your brain and nervous system to be less reactive in conflict situations so you have more access to your strengths and confidence in difficult situations.