



Lecture Notes

Week 5: Overcoming Challenges to Get Results

Unless you work for yourself and by yourself (that is, unless you work in a cocoon devoid of bosses and subordinates, colleagues, and customers, not to mention suppliers, competitors, and regulators), conflict in the workplace is inevitable. Indeed, in most organizations, *conflict is work and work is conflict*. It's how strategy gets decided, operations get improved, and people get hired and let go. Progress is rarely smooth, and it rarely comes with everyone making nice.

To be an effective teammate and a successful leader, you must know how to manage those moments when everyone is not on the same page – the times when competing demands, needs, and wants threaten the peace or promise to undermine a deal. Fortunately, this critical skill is entirely attainable so long as you can memorize one short line by the great poet, Robert Frost. "The best way out," he wrote, "is always through." In other words, to manage conflict, you must work through it. Avoidance is not a lucrative option.

Managing Conflict

The first step in managing conflict is to understand how you already approach contentious situations. To this end, you are asked to take to the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI). This is an assessment that analyzes your behavior in settings where you and others do not share similar views.

After you complete the assessment, reflect on how you handled a disagreement with your boss about a change initiative, or with a colleague about a new company policy. Think about how you've worked with another person while putting together a controversial report, or how you've dealt with a team assignment where you felt like the odd person out. You may consider, as well, how you sort out conflict in your personal life, since your behaviors at work and at home are usually parallel.

After you complete the TKI, you will score your answers and discover your conflict management style. The explanation that accompanies the inventory does an excellent job of analyzing how your style manifests itself, and how it is useful at work. Just as importantly, however, it also describes how your particular style predisposes you to behavioral shortcomings.

For example, if you tend to collaborate when conflict arises, recognize that you may, in fact, be afraid of butting heads rather than leveraging conflict as the learning experience it should be. After all, sometimes, a gutsy, open airing of differences can teach you something. By the same token, if your style is based on compromise, beware of accidentally creating a cynical climate of gamesmanship around you. It's sad, but true, that people tend to doubt a compromiser's intentions, even when they're noble. They assume you are posing a deal that only favors you.

The styles vary according to the individual's assertiveness and cooperativeness in managing conflict. From least assertive to most assertive, the most uncooperative styles are Avoiders and Competitors. Avoiders like to sidestep conflict, while Competitors try to satisfy their own concerns at the expense of the group.



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I. Avoiders

These individuals hope problems just go away on their own. We noted earlier that healthy conflict should generally not be avoided. But Avoiders sometimes do have a role to play. Their caution can help teams steer clear of conflicts that take up more time than the situation allows, that have a high potential to spiral into destructive behaviors, or that come at a moment that is not yet right to address the problem. Avoiders can infuriate people who have other styles when they miss meetings, avoid teammates with whom they disagree, withhold information, procrastinate on addressing critical issues, or drag their feet once a decision has been made.

II. Competitors

These people want to get their own way at all costs. Competitors' candor and tough-mindedness can be quite helpful in forcing conflict-avoidant teams to face unpleasant facts and make difficult decisions, in enforcing an unpopular decision, or in facing crisis situations that require decisiveness and action. But they can alienate people with other styles, such as when they monopolize the discussion, ignore opinions, exaggerate their position, attack people, or stonewall when they don't get what they want.

III. Accommodators

These team members just want everyone to get along. They can play a key role in situations that require a peacemaker to restore harmony or a compassionate approach to smooth over stressful interpersonal issues. But Accommodators can sometimes appear to abandon their concerns too quickly, interfere with problem-solving and negotiation, accept questionable decisions, or bend the rules to appear flexible or appease bullies and tyrants.

IV. Collaborators

These folks want to achieve an equitable outcome for everyone. They are extremely useful at finding innovative, long-term solutions to pressing problems that require diverse viewpoints. But they can also drive other people crazy by overanalyzing the problem, flailing around with problem-solving when it's no longer working, seeking consensus when there's not enough time, or prying into sensitive or embarrassing issues.

V. Compromisers

These people want to cut a deal and move on. They are quite helpful in brokering pragmatic situations when people are deadlocked, time is short, or a temporary solution is needed for a complex problem. But Compromisers can frustrate other types by rushing to find an expedient solution to a critical issue, abandoning long-held standards and values, proposing suboptimal ways forward, or finding a middle ground that satisfies no one.



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Keep in mind that each conflict resolution style can be useful in a particular situation. But each one can also frustrate people who have a different style. And the various styles can also combine to form a dominant style in teams and organizations - one that is often set by the leader's own example.

Collaboration vs. Zero-Sum Game

While it is important to understand how you approach conflict, it is equally important to consider how others approach conflict. In most cases, you will find that they fight to win, and they seek winner-take-all victories. Now, not everyone does, of course. After all, the TKI may have just labeled you as a Compromiser, an Accommodator, or even a Collaborator. But, since enough people in business fall into the Competitor category, it makes sense to understand a bit more about the zero-sum game mindset.

A "zero-sum game" refers to any contest in which the total winnings of all the parties, taken together, equals zero. The gains and losses cancel each other out. In a poker game, for instance, if one person wins \$300, the other players must have incurred a collective loss of exactly the same amount. In business, zero-sum games appear under all sorts of guises. It is a zero-sum game when two people are up for a job: one person will get it and the other will not. It is a zero-sum game when one company negotiates a raw material contract with a supplier. The more the supplier receives, the more the company has to pay.

The truth is zero-sum games only appear to be commonplace. In business, as in life, people automatically view many situations as black and white, win or lose. But, in reality, that outcome is more unusual than you might think. Psychologists connect this to our innately aggressive nature, anthropologists link it to how our brains were wired during the early days of human evolution, and sociologists see its root in our culture and socialization norms. For example, of the ten most popular children's games in the U.S., nine are games of competition where the object is to kill, capture, eliminate, bankrupt, or otherwise harm the other players. The tenth game (Follow the Leader) is a game of parallel striving, not a game of competition, since no one keeps score or is eliminated. But it does not encourage cooperation.

Seeing the world with a zero-sum mindset is incredibly unproductive. What good is destroying your opponent when a better and more sustainable solution for both parties is often just as easy to reach? You probably know of cases at work where a conflict could have been settled with a successful middle-ground solution, if only the participants had put their egos away. And, surely, you have endured battles on the job where precious time and energy should have been focused not on victory for one, but victory for all. But how can people break away from an all-or-none attitude? How can you help your colleagues to do so? Often, what is missing is the trust needed for collaborative solutions. Trust is hard to come by without a shared history. And, in real life, the ability to establish trust is also a rare commodity. It is a function of time – not only how long a relationship has lasted, but also how long the parties expect it to last.



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Make no mistake. There are certainly times in business when you see a zero-sum game, and that's what it is. Someone is going to win, and someone is going to lose. But part of being an effective leader – a leader who engenders trust – is having the maturity to ask in conflict situations, “Is there another way to look at this problem? Is a win-win solution possible?”

Reading Guide

Thomas-Kilman Conflict (TKI) Mode Instrument

Like the DiSC Assessment, the TKI Conflict Mode Instrument presents another way to learn about your leadership behavior. Here, you will consider your behavior in situations involving conflict. You will consider the two dimensions of your behavior (assertiveness and cooperativeness) to define the five modes of responding to conflict (competing, accommodating, avoiding, collaborating, and compromising). Think about how understanding the ways you address conflict can help you grow as a leader.

Davidson, “Managing Conflicts in Organizations”

While managers often assume that poor performance stems from workers' personal deficiencies, in fact, they usually stem from organizational and environmental issues in the workplace. Additionally, these workers may not have the tools to handle conflict in more emotionally developed ways, and simply need the training and resources to do so. We will explore the causes of conflict this week, as well as alternatives to conflict, to develop our skills in choosing the correct resolution to conflict in the workplace. Be aware of your typical response to conflict, and the other responses that are available to you.

Lencioni, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, “Traction”

We return to find Kathryn still illustrating for her executive team that, despite their experience, financial resources, and core technology, their company is still behind two of their top competitors. Kathryn presents the team, again, with their five dysfunctions: Status and Ego, Low Standards, Ambiguity, Artificial Harmony, and Invulnerability. The team assesses if there has been any progress in team dynamics. Be on the lookout for ways this team has improved its interactions.

Boule, M., “Best Practices for Working in a Virtual Team Environment”

Best Practices are explored in their application to both virtual and blended teams. These Best Practices are broken into the categories of Organizational Practices, Team Leadership, and Team Practices. In Organizational Practices, we will explore how to encourage early adopters to empower those around them, and the ways to use the best tools for every job. In Team Leadership, we focus on coaching and mentoring, as well as why virtual teams must have strong leadership. We close with Team Practices, highlighting the best ways for teams to interact virtually, and stressing the importance of experimentation. Consider why routine and context matter so much.



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McKinsey, “Why Leadership Development Programs Fail”

Here, we explore four common mistakes that, if avoided, can benefit companies by increasing morale, creating stronger leaders, and saving time and money. These include: overlooking context, decoupling reflection from real work, underestimating mindsets, and failing to measure results. Once we remove these obstacles, we can elevate the depth of our relationships with our employees, as well as what we can do to augment their capabilities. Be on the lookout for why evaluating leadership performance is so critical to continued success.

Your Leadership Journey

- If you are new to leadership, consider what your usual response to conflict is and what other options are available to you.
- If you are a team leader, reflect on how you can provide your team with better tools to address conflict.
- If you are a senior/veteran leader, address how you can establish a more trusting culture through the organization.

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