

CONFLICT

and Technical Communicators

By JUDITH L. GLICK-SMITH, *Fellow*

Conflict occurs at all levels of the human experience: from within the individual at the intrapersonal level to all-out global war among nations. How we manage conflict in our day-to-day lives depends on a variety of factors, but it begins with personal awareness. In *Getting to Yes*, first published in 1981, Roger Fisher, William Ury, and Bruce Patton argue that the first step in the process of conflict management is to “Separate people from the problem.” It is impossible to control how others are feeling and acting; however, you can control your own response. If you can recognize when you are in a conflict, take a step back, and evaluate the best response to the situation, you will better manage the inevitable conflicts in your life.

In the technical communication professions, we have a great deal of opportunity to address conflict. We, more than most people, are aware that, if communication is not effective, conflict can arise. Conflict can happen within and among our own technical communication teams, our end users, and our technologists—and it can quickly spiral out of control.

The two factors required for conflict management are (1) personal awareness of what is happening and (2) knowledge of how to incorporate the appropriate conflict style to facilitate resolution. Each of us has a predominant conflict style. However, if we are educated in the other styles, we can *choose* to use a different style. You cannot choose what style someone else will use; you can only choose your own style.

Over the years, researchers have identified many different conflict style sets. This article focuses on the work of

Kenneth Thomas and Ralph Kilmann, who developed the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI). The TKI can help you identify your predominant conflict style.

Style Overview

Thomas and Kilmann depict their model on a two-dimensional graph, where the vertical axis measures “concern for self” and the horizontal axis measures “concern for the other.” The continuum for the “concern for self” dimension ranges from low aggressiveness to high aggressiveness; the continuum for the “concern for others” dimension ranges from low cooperation to high cooperation. The conflict styles—competition, collaboration, compromise, avoidance, and accommodation—fit into the resulting matrix as shown in Figure 1 on page 22.

No conflict style is inherently right or wrong, but one or more styles may be inappropriate, depending on the situa-

STYLES



tion. The remainder of this article discusses the meaning of each style and will help you decide when each is appropriate to use.

Competition

Concern for self: High
Concern for others: Low
Goal: Win-lose; zero-sum;
“I win; you lose.”

When we think of competition, we think of sports, gaming, and war, where it is appropriate for one person, team, or country to win and the opponent to lose. However, in interpersonal relationships, such as working together in a collaborative environment, a competitive style can derail the resolution to a conflict.

People who consistently employ a

competitive style come across as aggressive and uncooperative—pursuing their own concerns at the expense of others and seeking to accomplish their goals by destroying their opponents’ options. In my experience, technical communicators tend to feel that programmers and engineers, who often keep their knowledge to themselves, are aggressive and uncooperative. The only way to work through this situation is to build trust with those individuals so that they move toward a collaborative style.

A competitive style is an attempt to gain power and to pressure the other person to change. In the work environment, where a manager-employee relationship is automatically a high-power/low-power relationship—and which can be especially pronounced in environments where the manager is not

a technical communicator—it is the manager’s responsibility to incorporate strategies that constructively balance the power. It is the employee’s responsibility to “manage up” in a way that instills trust and respect.

A competitive style of managing conflict can be productive in cases where accomplishing individual goals does not destroy the other person. It is appropriate and useful when quick decisions need to be made, as in an emergency; in brainstorming situations, to find the most creative ideas; in gaming and sports events; in inspiring increased sales for a company; and in situations where the goal is more important than the relationship.

The biggest disadvantage of using a competitive style is that relationships can be harmed beyond repair. People who practice a competitive style often drive others to use covert methods to get their needs met because conflicts with these people are always reduced to two options—“If you are not with me, you are against me.” At this point, trust is destroyed.

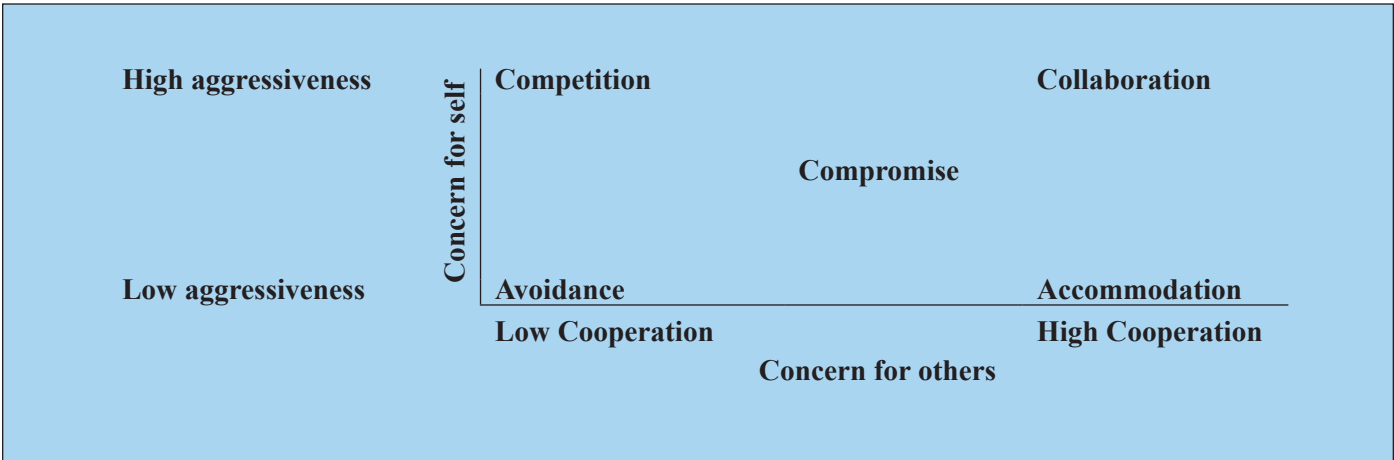
One positive use of the competitive style is that it can enable you to let others know how important an issue is to you. However, it is important to know when to continue in this mode. If your issue becomes more important than anything else, you could get caught up in winning at all costs; in the extreme, this could lead to verbal abuse, court actions, or even violence.

Collaboration

Concern for self: High
Concern for others: High
Goal: Win-win; “Everyone gets what they need.”

Collaboration is a style that strives to meet the needs of all parties. Technical communicators understand the value of collaboration. When consciously chosen by all team members, collaboration reduces the amount of conflict in a team environment. Each party explores other options and struggles with potential solutions. You don’t give up your self-interest; you integrate it with the other’s self-interest to reach agreement. A col-

Figure 1. Thomas and Kilmann's conflict style matrix.



laborative conflict doesn't end until all parties are satisfied and agree with the solution.

Collaboration fosters respect for and by all individuals. It helps everyone find integrative solutions by incorporating the feelings of the concerned parties. Collaboration builds relationships and, when successful, prevents destructive solutions to the conflict.

In my experience, technical communicators are treated as equals in the software development process when they work in a collaborative environment where conflict is addressed head-on. In non-collaborative environments, technical communicators are often expected to work around conflicts without direct resolution. How do you make the latter environments more collaborative? Address the conflict directly, but in a way that conveys a willingness for all parties to get what they need. Communicate: talk to your manager; talk to his or her manager. If that doesn't work, maybe it's time to move on to a more collaborative environment.

As with any other conflict style, it's important to use collaboration when appropriate. Collaboration takes time. If the relationship among the parties is not important, collaboration may not be worth the time and energy necessary to reach a win-win solution. Also, for collaboration to be successful, all parties must choose this style.

To recognize when others are using a collaborative style, pay attention to their words. They will make analytic remarks that indicate observation or data gathering in a non-hostile way (for example,

"We have a problem connecting when we are tired") or conciliatory remarks that indicate support, concession, or acceptance of responsibility ("I think we've both contributed to the problem").

Compromise

Concern for self: Medium
Concern for others: Medium
Goal: "We both give up something."

While technical communicators, as a general rule, would like to work in a collaborative environment all the time, we more often find ourselves compromising. When people practice a compromise strategy, they mutually give up and gain things they need. Compromise is both assertive and cooperative. However, it is frequently confused with collaboration. The difference is that, in collaboration, everyone gets what they need without giving up anything; in compromise, no one gets everything they need. Compromise usually takes less time than collaboration. Because each party gives up something valuable, this style is usually acceptable to all parties and can be employed when other strategies fail. Technical communicators often employ this strategy when developing style guides and other internal documentation for use by other team members. When working with developers, we make concessions based on system limitations, timelines, and other parameters.

The downside to compromise is that it can become an easy way out, a way to reach resolution without the extra effort required for more creative solutions. If you are constantly "splitting the differ-

ence," both you and the other party could be missing out on gains. In this context, compromise can shortchange the conflict process.

Use the compromise style when you want to appeal to the other party's sense of fairness. If you have reached an impasse, suggesting a trade-off can help you maximize wins and minimize losses. Compromise is also effective when you need to find a solution quickly but don't have all the data necessary to make an informed decision.

Avoidance

Concern for self: Low
Concern for others: Low
Goal: "Neither of us gets what we need."

Avoidance as a conflict style is a denial that the conflict exists. When the subject of the conflict comes up, avoiders change the subject, joke about it, or are noncommittal. There are cases where avoidance is appropriate—for example, when you need time to think of how to respond or if the conflict is not as important as other things going on at the same time. If the relationship is not important, avoidance may be a wise choice. It can also be used as self-preservation, if any other response would result in a negative reaction from the other party.

However, avoidance can be destructive if the other party perceives that you don't care enough to engage. Avoidance may cause others to simmer and stew over the conflict, which may eventually result in an angry, negative outburst. We see this regularly when companies practice avoidance by ignoring their clients' needs: us-

ers want new features in their products, other items take higher priority, and the new features aren't added to the product road map. Clients may conclude that they just aren't important enough and move to a competitor, or the company may reallocate all available resources to deliver to the squeaky-wheel client.

The purposes and perceptions of avoidance vary by culture. In high-context cultures (such as Asian cultures), where people are less verbal, avoidance is employed to preserve community and prevent the disruption of social bonds. In low-context cultures (such as the United States), where people are more verbal, those around you might push you to either reconcile or fight continuously. In other words, in collectivist, high-contrast cultures, avoidance represents "indirect working through," but in individualistic, low-contrast cultures, avoidance represents "indirect escalation." If you work on a global team with colleagues from a mixture of high-context and low-context cultures, be aware of these differences in your day-to-day interactions.

Accommodation

Concern for self: Low
Concern for others: High
Goal: "You win at my expense."

People who practice accommodation set aside their own interests in favor of pleasing other parties. They often play the role of martyr, complainer, or saboteur. (Does this sound like anyone you know?) Their primary goal is to preserve the relationship, even if it means they will lose completely. Their feelings when they acquiesce can range from anger to pleasure.

Over the past twenty-three years, I have worked with, taken classes with, or taught more than 500 technical communicators. Of these, I estimate that a third use accommodation as their primary conflict strategy. This preference for accommodation is one reason why technical communicators don't "manage up" well or effectively promote themselves at work. While we often feel that we are acting for the greater good, the parties involved in the conflict would be better

served if we used a more assertive style.

However, accommodation can be useful, especially when you're wrong. I once mistakenly sent an e-mail asking for information to everyone at my client company; I had been asked to send it only to specific departments. My mistake set in motion a company e-mail spin that would have wreaked havoc on everyone from the executives to the workers. As soon as I realized what I had done, I sent a follow-up e-mail that apologized to people not in the conversation, took the blame for the incorrect global nature of the e-mail, and told them to contact me directly if they had any questions. The spin stopped immediately.

Accommodation can help minimize losses when you are going to lose anyway. It can also preserve relationships and allow you to defer to people who are more senior or knowledgeable than you. But if you use accommodation all the time, it can create an undertone of competitiveness (for example, "I'm nic-

er than you are"). This competition can result in reduced creativity in conflict situations and increased power imbalances. People who accommodate give up easily or disengage from communication in an effort to maintain harmony by denying their own needs.

Limitations

Research has shown that people often perceive their conflict style to be different from what it actually is. These people may believe that they are cooperating to solve the problem while others are seeking to control or cause more problems by forcing compliance with hidden agendas. Educate yourself thoroughly on the various conflict styles and their supporting tactics so that you can make appropriate choices to facilitate a positive outcome.

To find out more about conflict styles and to learn your predominant style, visit www.kilmann.com/conflict.html. While

(Continued on page 48)

KNACK

(năk)

Etymology: Middle English: *knak*.

1: a special ready capacity that is hard to analyze or teach;
"an incredible *knack* translating manufacturer
documentation" (see **SH3.com**)

At SH3, we're not afraid to roll up our sleeves and get our hands dirty. We have a *knack* translating for heavy industry and OEMs. We translate equipment labels, operator manuals, industrial product specifications and more.

SH3 has a *knack* translating the tough stuff.



SH3. The definition of **translation** success.
ph: (816) 767-1117 www.sh3.com

Learn more about translation.
Sign up for our online newsletter at www.sh3.com.

Judges: STC Newsletter Competition

Jennifer Abbott <i>Member</i>	Rachel Houghton <i>Senior Member</i>	Julie Tarr <i>Member</i>
Tom Barnett <i>Fellow</i>	Elaine Jones <i>Senior Member</i>	Jean Tikusis <i>Member</i>
Lanette Cornwell <i>Senior Member</i>	Suzanna Laurent <i>Associate Fellow</i>	Bonnie Yelverton <i>Senior Member</i>
Robert Delwood <i>Member</i>	Mark L. Levinson <i>Senior Member</i>	
Kathy Hall <i>Senior Member</i>	Michael Opsteegh <i>Member</i>	
Paul Holland <i>Senior Member</i>	Garret Romaine <i>Associate Fellow</i>	

STC Public Relations Competition

The STC Public Relations Competition recognizes the effectiveness of STC chapters and special interest groups (SIGs) in sustained or special event public relations efforts. Good public relations programs enhance the image of STC and our profession among employers and the general public. The winners of this year's competition accurately and professionally communicated their mission and activities to their target audiences, using all available media including the Internet.

George Slaughter, Manager

Category:

Chapter Public Relations Program

Distinguished Technical Communication

Lone Star Community
Lauren Womack

Excellence

Atlanta Community
Eugene Larson

Category:

Specific Event or Service Publicity

Excellence

North Carolina State University
Student Community
Sarah Egan Warren

Judges: PR Competition

Rachel Houghton
Senior Member

Garret Romaine
Associate Fellow

Conflict Styles

(continued from page 23)

education in these styles will help enormously, the styles alone do not represent the entire knowledge base for managing conflict. Additional study is appropriate in the areas of power dynamics, high-context/low-context forms of communication, and cultural attribution. **i**

Judy Glick-Smith is the founder and president/CEO of MentorFactor, Inc., a consulting firm that focuses on conflict consulting, dispute system design, authenticity training, executive and life coaching, and strategic planning consulting. She is a Fellow and past president of STC and serves on the 2006–2007 STC Bylaws Committee. Judy received her masters of science in conflict management from Kennesaw State University in December 2006. You can reach Judy from her Web site at www.mentorfactorinc.com, via e-mail at judy@mentorfactorinc.com, or by phone at +1 (770) 633-5582.

SUGGESTED READINGS

Coleman, P. T. "Power and Conflict." In M. Deutsch and P. T. Coleman (Eds.), *The Handbook of Conflict Resolution: Theory and Practice* (pp. 108–130). San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2000.

Fisher, R., W. Ury, and B. Patton. *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In* (2nd ed.). Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2003.

Johnson, D.W., R.T. Johnson, and D. Tjosvold. "Constructive Controversy: The Value of Intellectual Opposition." In M. Deutsch and P. T. Coleman (Eds.), *The Handbook of Conflict Resolution: Theory and Practice* (pp. 65–84). San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2000.

Lewicki, R.J., and C. Wiethoff. "Trust, Trust Development, and Trust Repair." In M. Deutsch and P. T. Coleman (Eds.), *The Handbook of Conflict Resolution: Theory and Practice* (pp. 86–107). San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2000.

Thomas, K. W., and R. H. Kilmann. *Kenneth W. Thomas and Ralph H. Kilmann's Conflict Mode Instrument (The TKI)*, 2006. Retrieved December 21, 2006, from www.kilmann.com/conflict.html.

Wilmot, W. W., and J. L. Hocker. *Interpersonal Conflict* (6th ed.). Boston: McGraw Hill, 2001.

Discuss this article
online at [stcforum.org/
viewtopic.php?id=881](http://stcforum.org/viewtopic.php?id=881)

