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INTRODUCTION

Researchers have discovered a number of requirements for high-performing teams including the following:

- Clear team goals
- Authority to accomplish assigned tasks
- Appropriate people on the team
- Ability to resolve conflict openly and constructively

This booklet focuses on the fourth requirement, that is, effective conflict management. Why is conflict management important to team performance? Inevitably, teams are made up of members who differ in personal characteristics and experience. To be effective as a team, however, those members must reach agreements on goals, make good decisions about how to achieve those goals, and help each other accomplish their activities—despite their differences. Being able to reconcile differences, then—to handle conflict constructively—is a key determinant of team effectiveness.

This booklet builds on your scores on the *Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument* (TKI). Part I is designed to help you and your teammates understand your individual team member styles of conflict and to suggest ways that you can increase your individual effectiveness as team members. Part II can then help you identify your team's style for dealing with conflict, based on the styles of the team's members, and suggest ways to help the team function more effectively as a group.

What Is the TKI?

The TKI is the leading measure of conflict-handling modes. It was developed by Kenneth W. Thomas and Ralph H. Kilmann in the early 1970s and has been used in hundreds of research studies. It has sold more than four million copies.

One of the reasons for the TKI's popularity is that it shows how each conflict mode can be useful for dealing with conflict in certain situations. The TKI, then, allows people to appreciate the value of their own conflict styles—but also to learn the value of other styles as well. In short, it allows people to build on their strengths.

The TKI has proven to be extremely helpful for team building. It is widely used for helping both new and established teams at all organizational levels—from shop floor work groups to boards of directors. It is also used across a wide variety of private and public sector organizations.

In new teams, the TKI helps members get acquainted with each other's conflict styles, identify potential challenges, and set goals for how they should handle conflict as a group.

In established teams, the TKI helps team members make sense of the different conflict behaviors that have been occurring within the team, identify the team's challenges in managing conflict, and find constructive ways to handle those challenges.

What Causes Conflict in Teams?

Conflicts are a fact of life in teams—they are no one's "fault." Conflict is simply the condition in which the concerns of different team members—the things they care about—appear to be incompatible. As Figure 1 shows, conflict occurs when two conditions are present—interdependence and differences.
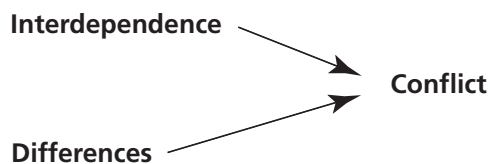
Interdependence → Conflict

Differences → Conflict

FIGURE 1 • ORIGINS OF CONFLICT

Interdependence exists when team members need to work together to satisfy their concerns. Interdependence is especially high in meetings when the team must make decisions that affect all members. So conflicts are common in these meetings—and not when team members are working independently.

Differences exist when team members have varying responsibilities, values, temperament, sources of information, or experience. With more differences, members bring more diverse concerns to team decision making, tending to create more conflict that needs to be reconciled. Although differences create more conflict within a team, they also provide an opportunity for richer understandings of an issue. For that reason, organizations often build differences into decision-making teams to make sure that diverse perspectives are represented.

What Makes Conflict Positive or Negative?

Team conflict is not good or bad in itself. Rather it has the potential for both positive and negative outcomes.

Positive outcomes can result from more effective conflict management. Conflicts may surface and resolve key task issues for a team, producing high-quality decisions. Working through conflict issues can result in learning and innovation. Successfully resolving conflict issues can also remove sources of tension in a team, strengthening work relationships and group cohesiveness.

The key factor in producing positive conflict outcomes is how those conflicts are handled. Research shows that the conflict-handling modes used by a team make a greater impact on its effectiveness than the amount of conflict or differences in the team.

Negative outcomes are all too familiar. Team conflicts may result in poor decisions or in deadlocks that produce no decisions. Conflicts can waste the team's time and energy. They can create resentments that damage working relationships and undermine group cohesiveness. If they persist, these negative outcomes can lead to discouragement and apathy.

What Are the Conflict-Handling Modes?

The five conflict-handling modes measured by the TKI are shown in Figure 2. They are described in terms of two underlying dimensions—assertiveness and cooperativeness.

Assertiveness is the degree to which you try to satisfy your *own* concerns.

Cooperativeness is the degree to which you try to satisfy your *teammates'* concerns.

These five conflict-handling modes are the basic choices available to you when your concerns appear

COMPETING

Assertive and uncooperative
You try to satisfy your own concerns at your teammate's expense.

COLLABORATING

Assertive and cooperative
You try to find a win-win solution that completely satisfies both your concerns and your teammate's concerns.

COMPROMISING

Intermediate in both assertiveness and cooperativeness
You try to find an acceptable settlement that only partially satisfies your concerns and those of your teammate.

AVOIDING

Unassertive and uncooperative
You sidestep the conflict without trying to satisfy your concerns or those of your teammate.

ACCOMMODATING

Unassertive and cooperative
You attempt to satisfy your teammate's concerns at the expense of your own.

Assertive

Unassertive

ASSERTIVENESS

Uncooperative ◄────────► Cooperative
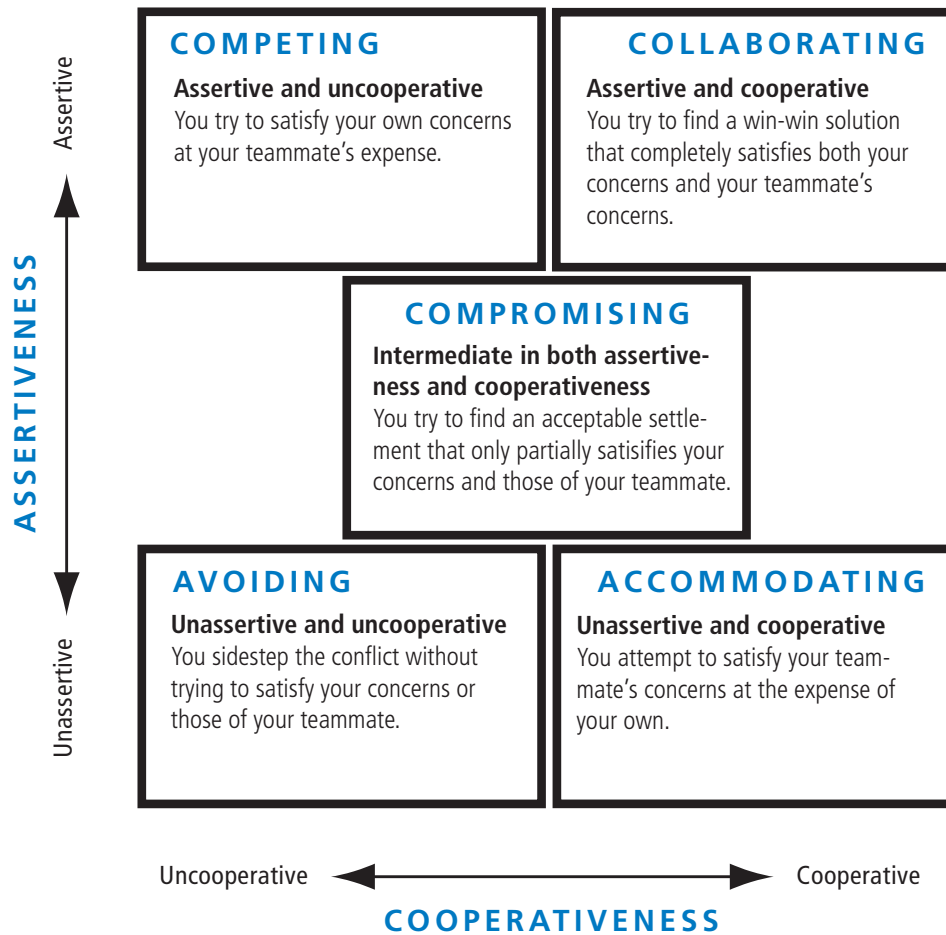
COOPERATIVENESS

FIGURE 2 • CONFLICT-HANDLING MODES

to be incompatible with a teammate's. The focus of this booklet is to help you understand how you and your teammates tend to use these conflict modes— and to suggest ways of using them more effectively.

How Can I Get the Most from This Booklet?

To get the most from this booklet, you will need to read it actively. Look for ideas that give you key insights into your team member conflict style and your team's conflict style. Underlining key passages and making notes in the margins will help you complete the worksheets at the end of Parts I and II of this booklet.

Part I focuses on team member conflict styles. It will help you identify your style based on your TKI scores and will explain the strengths and limitations of that style. It will also point out the strengths of your teammates' styles and how you can constructively draw upon them. The worksheet at the end of Part I will give you a chance to put that information together and determine how you can improve your personal effectiveness in conflict management.

Part II helps identify your team's conflict style, based on the mix of its members' TKI scores. It will help your team understand the strengths and challenges of its style and suggest remedies that the team can take to improve its conflict-handling effectiveness. The worksheet at the end of Part II will give your team