The Thomas- Kilmann Conflict Modes Model

This is activity employs a very useful model developed by Kenneth Thomas and Ralph Kilmann. The activity begins with a little theory on the different conflict modes.

The Theory

The Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument was developed to help individuals appreciate the different approaches to conflict management and understand their personal conflict-handling style. The instrument is based on the theory that there are five different conflict-handling modes, all a combination of assertion and cooperation. These are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Assertive?</th>
<th>Cooperative?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Competing</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compromising</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaborating</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoiding</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accommodating</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Competing:** pursuing your own needs at the expense of the other person’s. The goal is ‘to win’.

**Collaborating:** working with the other person to find a solution that satisfies both sets of concerns. To achieve this attention is given to finding out exactly what the needs of both parties are. The goal is ‘to find a win/win situation’.

**Compromising:** finding an immediate solution that is mutually acceptable and fulfils the needs of both parties at least partially. It differs from collaborating in that some needs may need to be sacrificed in order to have others met. The goal is ‘to find a middle ground’.

**Avoiding:** the conflict is not addressed and therefore neither set of concerns is immediately pursued. The goal is ‘to delay’.

**Accommodating:** the opposite of competing – it means neglecting your own concerns to satisfy those of another person. The goal is ‘to yield’.

Each of these five conflict-handling modes is useful in different situations and none is advocated as the most appropriate way of handling conflict. The effectiveness of each mode varies according to when it is used.

Everyone is capable of using each of these five modes interchangeably but typically use some more readily than others. This
can be because that mode has worked well for them in the past or because they are comfortable using it. There is a danger that they can become over-reliant on this and may consequently ignore what could in fact be a more effective method of handling the situation.

For example, a compromising approach can be valuable when a solution needs to be reached quickly, but if this is used regularly, it may be that a better solution that could be attained through a collaborative approach will be missed. Likewise if a person who will go out of their way to avoid a competitive approach and, this becomes routine when they are compromising their own job performance.

**Using the Thomas Kilman Conflict Modes**

One of the most often asked questions is "What are the right answers?" In this type of test, there are no "right" answers. All five modes of handling conflict are useful in various situations, and each represents a set of useful social skills. Listed below examples:

Competing: "Might makes right."

Collaboration: "Two heads are better than one."

Compromising: "Split the difference."

Avoiding: "Leave well enough alone."

Accommodation: "Kill your enemies with kindness."

The effectiveness of handling any conflict depends on the requirements of the conflict and the skill that is employed.

Each of us is capable of using all five conflict modes, and none of us can be characterized as having a single rigid style of dealing with conflict. However, because of personality traits or by habit, individuals tend to use one or two modes at a greater frequency than the others.

**The Activity**

Split the group into 5 teams/pairs or if there are not enough, they can each work individually to earn their points. If this is part of a longer workshop, then the score sheets used can accrue points from other activities. The idea is to give the learners the motivation to remember what they have learnt and to contribute their thoughts to the group. Each correct answer gains 5 points – you may wish to add extra points if the answers appear on your answer sheet. The winner(s) receive a small prize (sweets, stickers, a small toy etc).

Give each team/individual a score sheet and ask them to come up with as many applications of the different conflict types as they can. They will then score each others to get their points. To help you as a facilitator, here are some ideas – you could give them a “starter for 10” to help them get the idea.
List as many situations as you can think of in which to use these different styles.

**Competing is best used:**
When quick decisive action is vital; e.g., emergencies.
With important issues where unpopular courses of action need implementing. such as cost cutting, or enforcing unpopular rules and discipline.
With issues vital to company welfare when you know you are right.
To protect yourself against people who take advantage of you.

**Collaborating is best used:**
To find an integrative solution, when both sets of concerns are too important to be compromised.
When your objective is to learn; e.g., testing your own assumptions, understanding the views of others.
To merge insights from people with different perspectives on a problem.
To gain commitment, by incorporating other’s concerns into a consensual decision.
To work through hard feelings which have been interfering with an interpersonal relationship.

**Compromising is best used:**
When goals are moderately important, but not worth the effort or potential disruption of more assertive modes.
When two opponents with equal power are strongly committed to mutually exclusive goals; i.e., as in labor management bargaining.
To achieve temporary settlements to complex issues.
To arrive at expedient solutions under time pressure.
As a backup mode when collaboration or competition fails to be successful.

**Avoiding is best used:**
When an issue is trivial, of only passing importance, or when other more important issues are pressing.
When you perceive no chance of satisfying your concerns; e.g., when you have low power or you are frustrated by something that
Would be very difficult to change (national policies, someone's personality).
When the potential damage of confronting a conflict outweighs the benefits of its resolution
To let people cool down; i.e., to reduce tensions to a productive level and regain perspective and composure.
When gathering more information outweighs the advantages of an immediate decision.
When others can resolve the conflict more effectively.
When the issue seems tangential or symptomatic of another more basic issue.

**Accommodating is best used:**
When others can resolve the conflict more effectively.
When the issue is much more important to the other person than to yourself - to satisfy the needs of others, and to show you are reasonable.
To build up social credits for later issues which are important to you.
When continued competition would only damage your cause, i.e., when you are outmatched and losing.
When preserving harmony and avoiding disruption are especially important.
To aid in the managerial development of subordinates by allowing them to experiment and learn from their own mistakes.