

find the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI) to be an effective method of understanding how different conflict-handling modes, or styles, affect personal and group dynamics. It is also a very effective tool to help my clients learn how to select the most appropriate style for a given conflict situation.

Conflict is commonly seen as negative but it can be a catalyst for initiating change and improving communication and, when handled well, can lead to better decisions and improved relationships.

There are five conflict-handling modes based on two underlying dimensions: assertiveness and co-cooperativeness. Assertiveness is the degree to which you try to satisfy your own concerns. Co-operativeness is the degree to which you try to satisfy the other person's concerns.

The five different modes are:

- Competing
- Collaborating
- Avoiding
- Accommodating
- Compromising.

You can read more on the theory of this in Carol Wilson's "Tools of the trade" article on pp59-60.

While this assessment could be undertaken in a group feedback session, I have always used it with clients on an individual basis. The coachee has to read 30 pairs of statements and choose which of statements A and B is the most typical of his behaviour.

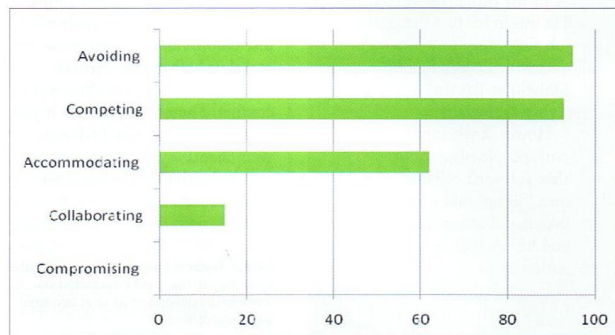
He gets a ten-page report that describes the five different modes and his scores against these five areas in the form of a graph.

A wide range of people take this assessment as a means of understanding more about how they deal with conflict. Many people have never considered different approaches: they tend to respond to conflict situations in one or two ways without thinking of alternatives or why a particular approach would be more useful for a particular situation. Therefore, the TKI is an excellent assessment to raise awareness.

At first glance, the competing style might appear to be the one to avoid, as it is not very involving, but it is useful when you need to take quick action, for example in an emergency when there is no time to seek agreement from others or when someone is trying to take advantage of you.

If someone is using the competing mode, they can do so effectively or poorly. An effective way to use this mode is to say something like "I appreciate you would like to stay working on this project but, due to the cut in government funding, we need to discontinue our work in this area" rather than to say something such as "I don't care what you have to say, I'm the boss and you'll do what I tell you".

Raising alternative ways of using each mode can be a great help for people who need to increase their effectiveness of working with others (see the graph below).



## TOOLS OF THE TRADE AT WORK

In a series showing how the tools and models featured in "Tools of the trade" work in practice, **Denise Taylor** explains how she has used TKI to help coachees rethink their approach to conflict

The graph shows the score for one of my clients, Natalie, compared to a sample of 8,000 people who have already taken the assessment and is similar to what is included in the report.

Natalie had chosen to take this assessment to help improve her relationships with her colleagues. As can be seen in the graph, her way of dealing with conflict is predominately one of extremes. She either avoids conflict completely or takes quite a challenging and competitive approach to others.

Clients often ask me if their approach is wrong and what the right approach is. I have to say 'it depends', as different approaches suit different situations. At times a collaborative approach works best while, in other situations, we need to be more accommodating or more competing.

We can be more effective when we can make a conscious choice about which mode to use rather than responding without any conscious thought.

The personal report explains what the individual results mean, so each of the five modes is considered on a separate page.

If we look at the **Avoiding mode**, for example, the report explains when this approach can be helpful, such as when other issues are more important or when you need to let other people cool down before an issue is addressed.

There is also useful information on why people may choose to use the **Avoiding mode**. For example, it may be because someone sees conflict as an intrusion and seeks to avoid situations that he is unsure how to handle.

The way in which we relate to others is very much a function of the situation in which we find ourselves. Natalie works in the City, where a very competitive approach is expected, so she has learned that she needs to demonstrate those competitive qualities to perform effectively in her organisation.

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Through coaching, Natalie talked about how difficult she found it to be herself within her company and her relationship with her co-workers.

I helped her develop a plan. She was to be vigilant for the next conflict situation and note the approach she took to it. Later she would review how effective she was in dealing with the situation and reflect on the effect that alternative styles would have had on it. We would then review this during our next coaching session.

Over four sessions, Natalie has moved from not considering which mode she used to deal with conflict to being much more flexible in her approach. This has had a positive impact on her relationships with her colleagues.

Another client, Simon, was a newly-promoted manager who felt he was being taken advantage of by the people he worked with. He was in his first management job, following work as a trainer, and, with a coaching qualification himself, he felt that a collaborative style was the best approach to take.

However, when collaborating, both people need to want to do this; you can't collaborate on your own. Simon told me that other people did not meet him part-way and he felt that he was losing his authority.

He took the assessment and it confirmed that collaboration was his preferred style, and he

scored very low on competing. Through feedback he was able to understand more about the range of styles available for dealing with conflict and to become more flexible in his style.

This has not been an easy personal journey for him, with times when he was not achieving his desired goals, but he is getting there with baby steps.

I worked together with Neil, a highly effective salesman who had just failed in his quest for promotion to sales manager. He was looking for ways that he could understand himself more so he could increase his chances of being successful at his next assessment centre.

Neil is highly competitive and determined to win but, while this was an effective style for him when the competition was sales people from other companies, it was much less effective in a leadership role in which he needed to be the one to help the team achieve. His very confrontational style was unlikely to have gone down well at interview or in the group exercise.

Coaching with Neil included helping him develop more flexibility in handling conflict and try out different approaches with staff. Again, this has not been easy – he has had to become more open to different styles but, with his high goal-orientation, he has made significant improvements.

The TKI is a short and simple questionnaire and, alongside a discussion, can raise awareness and thus help clients expand their repertoires for dealing with conflict. There is good news if you would like to use the TKI with your clients – you can register to use this with OPP Ltd and no qualifications are required. ■

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