Overview of the Five Conflict Styles

by Sophia Tutorial

	WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, we'll discuss the five ways of responding to a conflict, as defined by the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Styles. The areas of focus include:

1. Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Styles
2. The Five Conflict Styles
   a. Accommodating
   b. Avoiding
   c. Competing
   d. Compromising
   e. Collaborating
3. Intercultural Conflict Styles

1. Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Styles

How do you typically respond in a conflict situation?

We talked earlier about the "misunderstanding" stage of conflict when we discussed how conflict develops. The misunderstanding stage discusses how each player in the conflict interprets—and potentially misunderstands—the statements and actions of the other conflict participant and then the reaction that they give. Those reactions are the basis for conflict management.

Whether you're managing the resolution of a conflict between friends or embroiled in the midst of your own conflict, you make a choice on how the conflict should be managed by weighing the importance of the goal against the importance of the relationships in question.

⤷ EXAMPLE When you have a conflict with your spouse, you are likely to be invested in maintaining the health of your marriage and to care about your spouse's feelings about the conflict as well as your own—the relationship is important and must be considered in your approach to resolving the conflict.

When you have a conflict with a neighbor, you might be less invested in the relationship and focused more on the goal than on maintaining good terms.

In the 1970s, the researchers Kenneth Thomas and Ralph Kilmann proposed that there are five general styles of resolving conflict, which can be aligned along two axes. If you measure the amount that you value the

relationships involved in a conflict against the amount that you value achieving your goals in the conflict, you can plot where you fall in on the Thomas-Kilmann conflict styles graph.
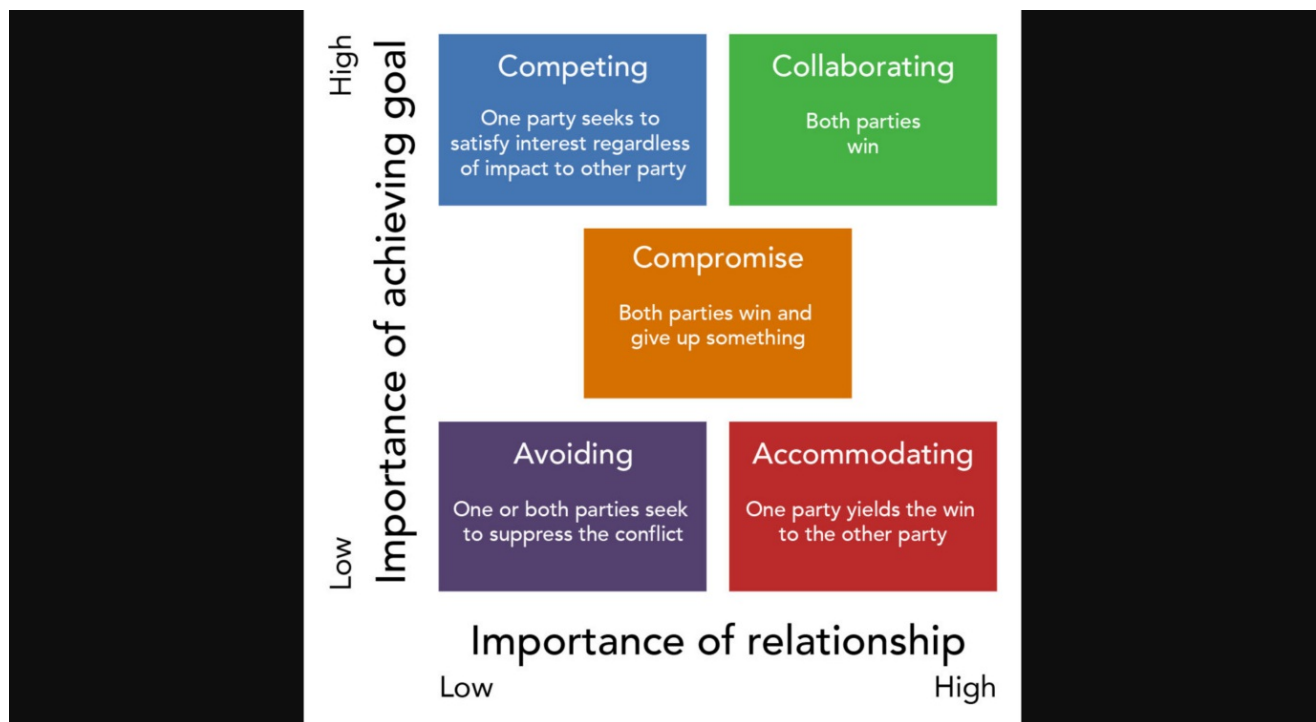
In this chart, the x-axis shows "importance of relationship" and "cooperativeness." If the chart is being used to analyze a specific conflict, then the x-axis refers to how much the parties value their relationship. A conflict between siblings would be far to the right in this chart; a conflict between classmates would fall farther to the left. If the chart is being used to analyze an individual's conflict style, then the x-axis measures **cooperativeness,** a behavior in which parties work together to achieve their mutual and respective individual goal.

The y-axis shows "importance of achieving goals" and "assertiveness." If the chart is being used to analyze a specific conflict, then the y-axis refers to how important the outcome of the conflict is to the parties. A conflict over the custody of a child would likely be near the top of the chart; a conflict over unloading the dishwasher would likely be near the bottom of the chart. If the chart is being used to analyze an individual's conflict style, then the y-axis measures **assertiveness**, or a behavior in which a person confidently makes a statement without need of proof, affirming his or her rights without attacking another person.

Each of the five conflict styles will fall somewhere on this graph, depending on whether they involve high assertiveness, low assertiveness, high cooperativeness, or low cooperativeness.

It can be useful to assess an individual conflict by looking at which conflict resolution styles are likely to be in play, given the relative importance of the relationship and the conflict goals to the parties. It can also be useful for a person to know what conflict resolution styles come most naturally to them.

The **Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Styles Assessment** is a commonly used assessment tool for determining a person's **preferred conflict style,** which is the conflict style an individual most often or habitually uses. This tool is a short questionnaire that measures a user's assertiveness and cooperativeness.

🚩 HINT

You might be able to find a free version of the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Styles Assessment online, if you would like to find out your own conflict style to have some personal context for this lesson.

No conflict style is necessarily better than another. Depending on the importance of the relationships and goals in a given conflict, a different conflict style might be the most appropriate one for the situation.

☆ **BIG IDEA**

Because different situations may call for different styles, it's important to remember that you are capable of using any style. The preferred style is only meant to signify that we, as individuals, typically have one that we tend towards.

📄 **TERMS TO KNOW**

Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Styles Assessment
One of the most commonly used assessment tools to determine a person's preferred conflict style.

Assertiveness
Behavior in which a person confidently makes a statement without need of proof, affirming his/her rights without attacking another's.

Cooperativeness
Behavior in which two parties work in concert to achieve their mutual and respective individual goals.

Preferred Conflict Style
The conflict style an individual most often or habitually uses.

2. The Five Conflict Styles

According to the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Styles, there are five different conflict styles:

- Accommodating
- Avoiding
- Competing
- Compromising
- Collaborating

Let's take a closer look at each while referring to the graph.

2a. Accommodating

Accommodating is a conflict resolution style in which one party helps to meet another's needs at the expense of his or her own.
The position of accommodating on the graph indicates that people who use this style are highly cooperative and willing to work with others. However, this style is low on assertiveness, meaning people who use this style are less likely to speak up when something is bothering them.

📄 **TERM TO KNOW**

Accommodating
A conflict resolution style in which one party helps to meet another's needs at the expense of his/her own.

2b. Avoiding

Avoiding is a conflict resolution style in which a party does not make any attempt to address or resolve the conflict.

As you can see in the chart, avoiding is low in both cooperativeness and assertiveness. People who are using this style are not going to say how they feel, and they're also not really working with others.

📄 **TERM TO KNOW**

Avoiding
A conflict resolution style in which a party does not make any attempt to address or resolve the conflict.

2c. Competing

Competing is a conflict resolution style in which one party seeks to meet their own needs at the expense of another party's needs. This is also sometimes known as forcing.

As we would expect, competing is high in assertiveness; people who use this style are speaking up about their wants or needs. However, this style is very low in cooperativeness.

📄 **TERM TO KNOW**

Competing
A conflict resolution style in which one party seeks to meet their own needs at the expense of another party's needs (sometimes also referred to as forcing).

2d. Collaborating

Collaborating is a conflict resolution style in which parties work jointly to try to meet all of each other's needs. This is sometimes also referred to as problem solving.

On the graph, you'll notice that collaborating is high in assertiveness because the party who is collaborating is speaking up about their own needs. Collaborating is also high in cooperativeness, as this style is willing to work with others in terms of their needs as well.

📄 **TERM TO KNOW**

Collaborating
A conflict resolution style in which parties work jointly to try to meet all of each other's needs (sometimes also referred to as problem solving).

2e. Compromising

Compromising is a conflict resolution style in which parties agree to sacrifice some of their needs in exchange for having others met.

Therefore, a compromising style is right in the middle in terms of both assertiveness and cooperation.

Compromising

A conflict resolution style in which parties agree to sacrifice some of their needs in exchange for having others met.

---

3. Intercultural Critique of the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Styles

Although the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Styles Inventory is one of the best known means of describing people's conflict styles, it is only one of a number of models and inventories.

Some scholars of conflict resolution point out that the Thomas-Kilmann instrument assumes that its users come from U.S. culture and hold American culturally derived assumptions and worldviews. It also assumes that Americans share a single culture regarding conflict, but the U.S. is very diverse, and there are many different communities with different approaches to conflict and conflict resolution.

⤳ EXAMPLE The dominant American culture generally places a great deal of importance on individuality and independence, while some other global cultures and American subcultures have a stronger emphasis on interconnection and community. Because the Thomas-Kilmann styles are based in American culture, they are based in the assumption that parties will frequently choose their own goals over maintaining the relationship; in other cultural contexts, this might rarely happen.

Because approaches to conflict can vary between cultures, a U.S.-based model may not be effective when used to model conflict styles of people who don't hold dominant American assumptions and worldviews.

There are other tools available to conflict resolution practitioners who wish to evaluate conflict styles from a less American perspective. These tools include the Intercultural Conflict Styles Inventory, which interprets conflict style while taking cultural difference into account and therefore may be more useful to use when addressing conflicts with cross-cultural elements.

As we discuss the five Thomas-Kilmann conflict styles in more detail, keep in mind that we are speaking primarily about the dominant American culture in these examples and scenarios. Conflict between parties from different cultures, or that take place in a different cultural context altogether, may look very different!

	THINK ABOUT IT

What does conflict look like in your culture? Does your culture place more value on collaboration or assertiveness? Does your culture place more value on achieving goals or on maintaining good relationships?

	SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned about the **Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Styles Assessment**, and how it can be used to determine which of the five conflict styles you most often use: **accommodating, avoiding, competing, compromising, or collaborating**.

You were also introduced to an **intercultural critique of the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Styles** and

understand that these styles are most useful in an American context. Good luck!

Source: Adapted from Sophia tutorial by Marlene Johnson. This content has been adapted from Lumen Learning's course Organizational Behavior And Human Relations.

📄 TERMS TO KNOW

Accommodating
A conflict resolution style in which one party helps to meet another's needs at the expense of his/her own.

Assertiveness
Behavior in which a person confidently makes a statement without need of proof, affirming his/her rights without attacking another's.

Avoiding
A conflict resolution style in which a party does not make any attempt to address or resolve the conflict.

Collaborating
A conflict resolution style in which parties work jointly to try to meet all of each other's needs (sometimes also referred to as problem solving).

Competing
A conflict resolution style in which one party seeks to meet his/her own needs at the expense of another party's needs (sometimes also referred to as forcing).

Compromising
A conflict resolution style in which parties agree to sacrifice some of their needs in exchange for having others met.

Cooperativeness
Behavior in which two parties work in concert to achieve their mutual and respective individual goals.

Preferred Conflict Style
The conflict style an individual most often or habitually uses.

Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Styles Assessment
One of the most commonly used assessment tools to determine a person's preferred conflict style.