Thomas-Kilmann Model

Idea In Short

Every executive, manager and team leader needs to understand their default conflict-handling mode — and more importantly, when to use a different one. Kenneth W. Thomas and Ralph H. Kilmann introduced the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument [TKI] in 1974, giving organizations their first rigorously validated tool for diagnosing how individuals handle interpersonal conflict. Since its introduction, the TKI has sold over 10 million copies globally, making it one of the most widely used conflict management assessments in organizational practice. The model's premise is not that one conflict mode is correct. It is that situational effectiveness requires fluency across all five modes — and that most leaders chronically overuse one or two while neglecting the others. The decision for any organization is direct: treat conflict style awareness as a leadership competency, build it into development programs and measure it against the situations leaders actually face.

Thomas and Kilmann developed the TKI in the early 1970s at a moment when organizational conflict was being reconceptualized. The dominant assumption through the 1950s had been that all workplace conflict was dysfunctional and should be eliminated. By the late 1960s, organizational theorists were recognizing that conflict, when handled appropriately, could drive innovation, surface critical information and improve decision quality. Thomas and Kilmann built their instrument to help individuals navigate this more nuanced view — not to suppress conflict but to handle it consciously and effectively.

The TKI draws its two-dimensional architecture from the Managerial Grid developed by Robert Blake and Jane Mouton in 1964. Blake and Mouton used "concern for people" and "concern for production" as their axes; Thomas and Kilmann reframed these as "cooperativeness" — the degree to which an individual attempts to satisfy the other party's concerns — and "assertiveness" — the degree to which they pursue their own concerns. The combination of these two dimensions at different levels produces five distinct conflict-handling modes. The instrument itself consists of 30 paired statements; for each pair, the respondent chooses between two behavioral options, each designed through a multi-stage

research process to be equal in social desirability.

In a 1977 paper, Kilmann and Thomas documented the instrument's psychometric development in Educational and Psychological Measurement, reporting acceptable levels of test-retest reliability, internal consistency and convergent validity against three other conflict measures1. The Myers-Briggs Company now publishes and distributes the TKI globally, describing it as the "leading measure of conflict-handling behaviour" — a claim the instrument's half-century of continuous use and over 10 million administrations substantiates.

The Five Conflict-Handling Modes

The TKI maps five conflict modes across the assertiveness-cooperativeness grid. No mode is inherently correct. Each one is effective in specific situations and counterproductive in others. The TKI's analytical value lies in revealing which modes an individual overuses and which they neglect — and in creating the awareness required to shift deliberately between them.

Competing occupies the high-assertiveness, low-cooperativeness quadrant. A leader using this mode pursues their own goals at the expense of others, relies on authority, presses positions and uses whatever influence they have to win. It is appropriate in genuine emergencies where speed matters more than consensus, when an unpopular decision must be made and explained rather than negotiated, or when the organization's non-negotiable values are at stake. The danger of overuse is significant. Research from OPP across 33,000 TKI respondents found that the more senior the leader, the more likely they are to default to Competing — a pattern that damages team trust, suppresses dissent and produces decisions without buy-in.

Accommodating sits at the opposite corner: low assertiveness, high cooperativeness. The leader using this mode yields their own position to satisfy the other party's concerns. It is the appropriate response when the relationship matters more than the immediate issue, when the leader recognizes they are wrong, or when continued conflict would cause disproportionate damage to team cohesion. Chronic Accommodating, however, signals a leader who has learned to prioritize short-term harmony over honest engagement, which erodes accountability and defers unresolved tensions until they surface in more damaging forms.

Avoiding places both assertiveness and cooperativeness at their lowest levels. The leader sidesteps the conflict entirely — postponing it, withdrawing from the situation or denying its existence. Avoiding is appropriate for trivial issues not worth the cost of engagement, when the timing is wrong for a productive conversation, or when the leader needs time to gather information before confronting a complex situation.

Collaborating places both assertiveness and cooperativeness at their highest levels. The leader using this mode treats the conflict as a problem to be solved jointly, commits to understanding the other party's concerns fully and works toward a solution that satisfies both sets of interests. It is the mode most likely to produce durable, high-quality outcomes in situations where both parties' underlying concerns genuinely matter. Its cost is time. Collaborating demands investment in dialogue that competing and compromising avoid. Applied to low-stakes disagreements or situations where one party clearly holds the relevant expertise, it consumes organizational resources without proportionate return.

Compromising sits at the midpoint of both dimensions — moderate assertiveness, moderate cooperativeness. Each party concedes something; each party gains something. It is appropriate when a temporarily workable solution is preferable to no solution, when the parties are of roughly equal power and both have legitimate interests, or when time pressure makes collaboration impractical. Compromising often leaves both parties partially dissatisfied and it can prevent the deeper exploration of interests that Collaborating would enable. In high-stakes strategic negotiations, premature compromise can anchor both parties to positions that a more exploratory process would have transcended.

Overuse and Underuse

The TKI's diagnostic value is not in identifying a preferred mode — it is in exposing the overuse patterns that most leaders develop unconsciously. Thomas and Kilmann's framework is explicit that each mode has both situational utility and situational cost. A mode becomes a liability when it operates as a reflex rather than a deliberate choice.

OPP's analysis of 33,000 TKI respondents found that senior leaders disproportionately overuse Competing, while non-managers disproportionately overuse Avoiding and Accommodating. These are not random patterns — they reflect the power dynamics of organizational hierarchy. Leaders at the top experience fewer social constraints on assertive behavior; individuals at the bottom experience stronger social incentives to avoid

confrontation. Both patterns produce organizational pathology at scale. Competing at the top suppresses the critical information flow that senior decision-making requires. Avoiding at the bottom allows performance problems, interpersonal tensions and strategic misalignments to persist without surfacing.

A 2024 study published in Frontiers in Psychology examined the relationship between conflict management styles and leadership effectiveness, confirming that leaders who demonstrate the ability to flex across multiple conflict modes show measurably higher leadership effectiveness scores than those with high dependence on a single mode2. The same study found that mode flexibility is a learnable competency — it improves significantly with awareness, structured coaching and deliberate practice in varied conflict scenarios.

Organizational and Team Applications

The TKI operates at three levels of organizational application: individual development, team dynamics and organizational culture diagnosis.

At the individual level, the TKI gives leaders a structured vocabulary for their own conflict behavior and a map for expanding their behavioral repertoire. A leader who completes the TKI and discovers a strong Competing pattern across all conflict situations has actionable information: not to abandon Competing, but to identify the situations where it is counterproductive and develop the skills to use Collaborating or Accommodating instead. The Myers-Briggs Company distributes the TKI in online and self-scorable formats for use in negotiation training, mediation, team building, leadership development and change management programs.

At the team level, the TKI surfaces the conflict profile of the team as a whole — identifying which modes are collectively overrepresented and which are structurally absent. A leadership team dominated by Competing styles will process strategic disagreement through positional bargaining rather than interest exploration, limiting the quality of decisions made under pressure. A team dominated by Accommodating and Avoiding styles will achieve surface harmony at the cost of unresolved tensions that damage execution. Administering the TKI across a team and mapping the aggregate profile provides a team diagnostic that most standard team effectiveness assessments do not capture.

A 2025 study published in the Contemporary Journal of Social Science Review examined

the relationship between conflict management styles and organizational performance across 150 participants from multiple organizations and multiple departments, using the TKI as the primary diagnostic instrument. The study confirmed that effective conflict management, when operationalized through the TKI framework, produces measurable improvements in organizational performance management3. A parallel review published in the Journal of Analysis, Prevention and Solutions confirmed statistically significant positive relationships between conflict management strategy adoption and organizational performance indicators including efficiency and productivity.

Deploying the TKI Effectively

Organizations deploy the TKI most effectively when they treat it as a development instrument rather than a selection or appraisal tool. The assessment's value is not in labeling leaders — it is in creating the self-awareness and situational vocabulary that enables deliberate mode selection. Using the TKI in performance management or hiring without appropriate context will produce defensive responses that undermine the instrument's diagnostic accuracy.

The most productive deployment pattern pairs TKI assessment with structured coaching that explores the situational conditions under which each mode is appropriate. Leaders who understand not just their own pattern but the logic of each mode — why Competing serves well in a crisis and poorly in strategic planning, why Collaborating builds durable alignment but demands time that emergencies cannot afford — develop the situational judgment that mode flexibility requires.

At the organizational culture level, aggregated TKI data across a business unit or function reveals the conflict culture of that entity — the default patterns through which disagreement is handled organizationally, independent of any individual. Organizations with Competing-dominant cultures tend to execute decisions quickly but lose the quality benefits of collaborative deliberation. Organizations with Avoiding-dominant cultures maintain surface cohesion but accumulate unresolved tensions that eventually surface in disruptive ways. Identifying and consciously shifting organizational conflict culture is a change management intervention in its own right — one the TKI's aggregate data makes possible.

- 1Developing A Forced-Choice Measure Of Conflict-Handling Behavior: The 'Mode' Instrument; Educational And Psychological Measurement, 37(2), 309–325

- 2Managing Conflict Styles To Accelerate Leadership Effectiveness; PMC / Frontiers In Psychology. (2024)
- 3Investigating The Impact Of Effective Conflict Management On Organizational Performance Management Using The Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument; Contemporary Journal Of Social Science Review. (2025)

Summary

The Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument [TKI], introduced in 1974 by Kenneth W. Thomas and Ralph H. Kilmann, maps five conflict-handling modes — Competing, Collaborating, Compromising, Avoiding and Accommodating — across assertiveness and cooperativeness dimensions. With over 10 million administrations globally, the TKI identifies overuse patterns, builds mode flexibility and links conflict style awareness directly to measurable leadership and organizational performance outcomes.