

Conflict Styles Activity

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1. Invite participants to self-select into one of the following four groups based on the conflict style with which they most identify.
 - a. Define and explain each conflict style (see next page)
 - b. Emphasize that none of the conflict styles are “bad” or “good” but rather that each of them addresses some needs but not others. In different contexts, different needs might be seen as more important and therefore, different conflict styles might be more appealing.
 - c. The goal of this activity is to expand awareness of our own tendencies in regard to conflict and, as a result of that increased awareness, be able to more mindful (rather than reflexive or conditioned) choices about how to respond to conflict
 - d. Remind participants that we sometimes have different styles in different contexts but that our dominant conflict style is the one we tend to use with those who are closest to us (e.g., family, romantic partner, close friends). If they believe two or more conflict styles describe them equally well, that’s ok...they can just pick one for the purpose of the exercise.
2. Once the participants are in their groups, give them the following instruction (either one at a time or as a set)
 - a. Briefly describe a specific example when you used this particular conflict style (not recommended for larger groups)
 - b. Which needs are met by this conflict style (provide handout of needs)
 - c. Which needs are NOT met by this conflict style
3. Have the groups share out so that everyone in the room is familiar with both the benefits (needs met) and the limitations/costs (needs not met) by the four conflict styles.
4. If there is time, the activity can be expanded by having each group divide itself into “hosts” and “visitors”. The hosts stay where they are while the visitors go visit the other conflict styles. Visitors are invited to ask questions about the conflict style they are visiting. Hosts answer the questions in whatever way makes sense to them. Ideally, it’s less of a Q&A and more of a conversation. After a certain amount of time, have the visitors return to their original conflict style group and switch places with the hosts so that the original hosts are now the visitors. Give participants another block of time to visit with the other groups.

Note: For more information about conflict styles and how they can be assessed, see Thomas, K. W. (2008). Thomas-kilmann conflict mode. *TKI Profile and Interpretive Report*, 1(11).

<https://lig360.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Conflict-Styles-Assessment.pdf>

Brief descriptions of the four conflict styles

Descriptions are based on work of Thomas Kilmann who sometimes also adds “Compromising”

1. **Avoiding.** The conflict avoider finds conflict aversive. They’ve learned (probably in their family of origin) that conflict is dangerous or messy or unpredictable. As a result, their response to conflict is to move away from it whenever possible. In some cases, this may look like “ghosting” or other forms of disconnecting from the other party. In other cases (when more extreme disconnection is not possible), it may take the form of pretending that they are unbothered and that there isn’t a problem/conflict in the first place.
2. **Appeasing (or accommodating).** The appeaser can be a people-pleaser or someone with high levels of empathy. They may also be uncomfortable with conflict, sometimes because they’ve learned that other people become agitated during conflict and the agitation is scary and potentially unsafe. Appeasing, for them, is typically a way of caring for others as well as for themselves: By giving the upset party what they want (or as much as possible of what they want, they decrease the other party’s agitation, potentially creating more harmony and a greater sense of safety.
3. **Competing.** People who compete in conflict often have the belief that conflicts have winners and losers and that it’s much better to win than to lose. For some people, competing can take the form of aggression and even violence, but for many people with this conflict style, competing takes the form of arguing or debating, sometimes respectfully but nevertheless with the goal of being right or at least convincing the other party that they are.
4. **Cooperating.** Cooperating should not be confused with compromising. Whereas compromising consists of giving up something you want in order to get something else you want, the cooperating style is characterized by an attempt to understand the other party and have one’s own needs understood as well. The person using the cooperating conflict style often values the process of how a decision is made over the decision itself. Rather than having the goal of de-escalating (appeasement) or being right (competing), the goal of cooperating is to find a way forward that is truly best for all parties.

Competing (Win-Lose)	Avoiding
Appeasing (Lose-Win)	Collaborating (Win-Win)