



Collaboration & Conflict Intersect

Conflict is inevitable when people bring different perspectives, priorities, needs, and experiences to the table—and those differences are often exactly what make collaboration valuable. Effective leaders recognize that not all conflict is the same, and no single response works in every situation. Understanding different types of conflict helps leaders identify *what is really creating the tension*, while understanding conflict styles helps them choose *how to respond intentionally*. Together, these skills allow leaders to move beyond simply avoiding or resolving conflict and instead use it productively to strengthen relationships, improve decisions, and create better outcomes.

This toolkit helps you better understand what drives conflict, recognize your own patterns when conflict occurs, and intentionally adapt your approach. You'll explore six common sources of workplace conflict, assess five conflict styles, and identify practical strategies for responding to different people and situations. The goal isn't to eliminate conflict—it's to use it more effectively to support stronger collaboration, relationships, and results.

Here are six common types of conflicts:





Interpersonal Conflict

Interpersonal conflict often arises around communication preferences (including method and frequency) and work style. The problem with interpersonal conflict is that it can turn into personal dislike. However, interpersonal conflicts are much easier to resolve than values conflicts (which will be explained later in this document)—if you realize that they reflect superficial, not substantive, differences.

Common Interpersonal Issues

Some common communication preferences and work styles that result in interpersonal conflict are:

- Regular, documented communication versus spontaneous, verbal communication
- Organized versus disorderly
- Detail-oriented versus big-picture-oriented
- Intent on meeting deadlines versus prone to procrastination

How to Identify

If you experience any of the following, you are probably dealing with an interpersonal conflict:

- ✓ You become quickly frustrated with the other person for what you feel is an annoying habit.
- ✓ You feel a desire to change the other person.
- ✓ Your emotions related to the conflict are out of balance with its importance.
- ✓ You feel tempted to argue with the other person.

Conflict of Goals

Clashing goals is another common source of conflict. A typical scenario is when two people fight for their personal goals, ignoring the welfare or success of the team, department, or organization.

Common Competing Goals

Some goals that often result in conflict at the workplace are:

- Achieving the highest levels of customer satisfaction versus achieving the highest levels of efficiency
- Attaining short-term profitability versus making a long-term investment
- Staying within an established budget versus spending money to pursue an unexpected opportunity



- Prioritizing one project over another

How to Identify

If you experience any of the following, you are probably dealing with a conflict of goals:

- ✓ A conflict involves concrete decisions or actions taken by another person that you disagree with.
- ✓ Your ideas or approach would provide you—but not necessarily the other person—with the best possible outcome.
- ✓ You realize that the issue can be resolved with rational problem solving.

Limited Resources

Most organizations have a finite amount of resources, especially during economic downturns and financial struggles. During these times, employees may be forced to compete for available resources, like finances and staffing, in order to carry out their responsibilities effectively.

How to Identify

If you notice disagreements or arguments related to any of the following, you are probably dealing with a conflict of limited resources:

- ✓ Money or budget allocations
- ✓ Staffing
- ✓ Time allocations: for example, how to divide time among various projects
- ✓ Supplies, equipment, or technology (including program software)
- ✓ Space

Conflict of Values

One of the sources of conflict that causes the greatest division is a difference in values—an incompatibility of the beliefs, principles, and ideas that ground and guide people's behavior. These deep-seated differences are often difficult for people to accept and understand in others, and they usually can't be resolved through negotiation, reason, or persuasive arguments. In fact, when values are involved, the conflict isn't the difference in values per se, but the inability to accept those differences.

Common Clashing Values

Some values that often result in conflict at the workplace are:



- Tradition versus originality
- Loyalty versus honesty
- Individual focus versus group focus
- Planning versus improvising
- Stability versus risk-taking
- Competition versus collaboration

How to Identify

If you experience any of the following, you are probably dealing with a conflict of values:

- ✓ You find yourself insulting or attacking another person because of his or her character or beliefs.
- ✓ You don't understand someone's reasoning, or it seems illogical to you.
- ✓ Someone's behavior elicits an intense reaction in you.
- ✓ The principle of the matter is more important to you than the situation itself.

Poor Performance

When an employee underperforms or doesn't meet commitments, it can negatively affect others who depend on that person's work to complete their own successfully. This becomes a conflict when the underperformer doesn't recognize or acknowledge his or her part in the situation.

How to Identify

If you notice an employee with any of the following habits, you are probably dealing with a conflict of poor performance:

- ✓ They work too slowly (result: missed deadlines or project delays).
- ✓ They make mistakes frequently.
- ✓ They don't follow through on commitments.
- ✓ They don't meet expectations.

Power Struggle

Unhealthy competition occurs in the workplace when an employee's focus shifts from being a top performer to wielding an undue amount of power. Some industries tend to promote more competitive environments than others, and some individuals let their egos drive their behavior. A power struggle emerges when people try to pressure or manipulate others in order to gain power and status.



How to Identify

If you notice any of the following, you are probably dealing with a power struggle:

- ✓ Someone is territorial about projects, resources, etc.
- ✓ Someone has a desire to win and see the other person lose.
- ✓ Someone has a large ego and a need to be right.
- ✓ Someone has an extreme need for control.
- ✓ Someone is hoarding information; they have knowledge or resources that they are unwilling to share.
- ✓ Someone engages in manipulative behavior or uses pressure tactics.

~ Source Unknown

Conflict Styles Assessment

Instructions: Circle the number that best reflects your style under conflict. Try to use all elements along the continuum.

In Conflict, I will:	Not at all Likely						Extremely Likely
1. make some effort to get my own way.	1	2	3	4	5	6	
2. postpone issues until I have had time to think them over.	1	2	3	4	5	6	
3. try to stress things upon which we both agree rather than negotiate on things we disagree.	1	2	3	4	5	6	
4. usually propose a reasonable middle ground.	1	2	3	4	5	6	
5. attempt to immediately work through our differences.	1	2	3	4	5	6	
6. avoid taking positions that create controversy for myself and others.	1	2	3	4	5	6	
7. generally, try to win my own position.	1	2	3	4	5	6	
8. try to soothe the other person's feelings in order to preserve our relationship.	1	2	3	4	5	6	

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9. often let others take responsibility for solving the problem.	1	2	3	4	5	6
10. give up some points in exchange for others.	1	2	3	4	5	6
11. attempt to deal with the other person's concerns as well as my own concerns.	1	2	3	4	5	6
12. feel that differences are not always worth worrying about.	1	2	3	4	5	6
13. try to convince the other person of the logic and benefits of my position.	1	2	3	4	5	6
14. attempt to get all concerns and issues immediately out in the open.	1	2	3	4	5	6
15. try to find a fair combination of gains and losses for everyone involved.	1	2	3	4	5	6
16. avoid creating unpleasantness for myself.	1	2	3	4	5	6
17. generally, press to get my points across.	1	2	3	4	5	6
18. sometimes sacrifice my own wishes for the wishes of the other person.	1	2	3	4	5	6
19. consistently seek the other person's help in working out a solution.	1	2	3	4	5	6
20. let the other person have some of their positions if they let me have some of mine.	1	2	3	4	5	6
21. let the other person have their way if the issue seems important to them.	1	2	3	4	5	6
22. be firm in asserting my wishes.	1	2	3	4	5	6
23. do what is necessary to avoid conflict.	1	2	3	4	5	6
24. try not to hurt the other person's feelings.	1	2	3	4	5	6
25. always share the details of the problem with the other person so we can work it out together.	1	2	3	4	5	6
26. generally, try to find a compromise solution.	1	2	3	4	5	6

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- 27. be firm in pursuing my own goals.
- 28. always considerate of the other person's views.
- 29. try to find a position that is intermediate between the other person's and mine.
- 30. almost always be concerned with satisfying all our wishes.

1	2	3	4	5	6
1	2	3	4	5	6
1	2	3	4	5	6
1	2	3	4	5	6

This assessment is based on the original conflict model by Kenneth W. Thomas and Ralph H. Kilmann.

Scoring

Indicate the score you circled for each question. Be careful in recording your answers in the correct location, there is no pattern between the question order and the styles.

Style	Questions						Totals
Avoid	Q2 =	Q6 =	Q9 =	Q12 =	Q16 =	Q23 =	Total =
Accommodate	Q3 =	Q8 =	Q18 =	Q21 =	Q24 =	Q28 =	Total =
Compromise	Q4 =	Q10 =	Q15 =	Q20 =	Q26 =	Q29 =	Total =
Competitive	Q1 =	Q7 =	Q13 =	Q17 =	Q22 =	Q27 =	Total =
Collaborative	Q5 =	Q11 =	Q14 =	Q19 =	Q25 =	Q30 =	Total =

The highest score indicates your preferred style.

NOTE: There are advantages and disadvantages to the use of each conflict mode (or style). The key is to use the appropriate style in the appropriate setting with the "right" audience.



Leading Collaboration

The Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI) identifies five common conflict styles based on levels of assertiveness and cooperativeness. Understanding these styles helps individuals recognize how they naturally respond to conflict and adapt their approach to improve communication, strengthen relationships, and navigate challenges more effectively.

Quick Style Snapshot

Style	Focus	Strength	Watch Out For
Competing	Winning	Decisive	Can overpower others
Collaborating	Mutual solution	Builds buy-in	Can take time
Compromising	Middle ground	Fast resolution	May dilute outcomes
Avoiding	Delay/withdraw	Prevents escalation	Issues remain unresolved
Accommodating	Relationship harmony	Preserves connection	Own needs ignored



When Each Style Works Best

<u>Style</u>	<u>Most Effective When...</u>
Competing	Quick decisions are needed
Collaborating	Long-term commitment matters
Compromising	Time is limited
Avoiding	Emotions are too high temporarily
Accommodating	The relationship matters more than the issue

What You Might Notice

COMPETING

You may notice:

- Strong opinions
- Fast decision-making
- Direct language
- Focus on results/control
- Challenging others' ideas

Best response:

- Stay factual
- Be concise
- Acknowledge goals
- Avoid emotional escalation
- Focus on outcomes and solutions

COLLABORATING

You may notice:

- Asking many questions
- Desire for everyone's input
- Exploring multiple perspectives
- Focus on mutual solutions
- Longer discussions to gain alignment

Best response:

- Engage openly
- Be willing to brainstorm
- Share perspectives honestly
- Stay patient with the process
- Clarify shared goals

Watch for:

- Overprocessing
- Delayed decisions
- Meeting fatigue

COMPROMISING

You may notice:

- Seeking middle ground quickly
- Willingness to "split the difference"
- Focus on fairness
- Desire to move forward efficiently
- Moderate flexibility

Best response:

- Clarify priorities
- Identify non-negotiables
- Ensure important concerns are not overlooked

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- Confirm both parties feel heard
- Focus on practical next steps

Watch for:

- Superficial resolution
- Settling too quickly
- Unclear accountability

You may notice:

- Silence
- Delayed responses
- Topic changes
- Withdrawing from discussion
- Minimal engagement

Best response:

- Create psychological safety
- Ask open-ended questions
- Avoid public pressure
- Clarify importance calmly
- Give space for reflection when needed

Watch for:

- Unresolved tension
- Assumptions increasing
- Important issues lingering

ACCOMMODATING

You may notice:

- Agreeing quickly
- Prioritizing harmony
- Reluctance to disagree
- Supporting others' preferences
- Downplaying personal needs

Best response:

- Invite their perspective directly
- Ask what they need or prefer
- Reinforce that disagreement is okay
- Ensure they are not overcommitting

- Create balanced participation

Watch for:

- Resentment building quietly
- Burnout
- Lack of honest feedback
- Unspoken concerns



Strategy Adjustment Guide

Ask: "What does this situation require?"

If tension is escalating... Shift toward...

Power struggle	Collaborating
Emotional overload	Avoiding briefly
Slow/no decision	Competing or Compromising
Hurt relationship	Accommodating or Collaborating

Leading Through Conflict

Conflict itself isn't the problem. **How we understand and respond to it determines its impact.**

Effective leaders recognize what is driving the conflict, notice their own default response, and choose an approach that fits the situation rather than simply reacting out of habit. No conflict style is always right—or always wrong. The goal is **flexibility and intention**: knowing when to lean in, when to listen, when to compromise, when to be direct, and when creating space may be the wisest choice.

As you navigate conflict, ask yourself:

- What is really driving this conflict?
- What is my natural response—and is it helping?
- What does this situation require from me?
- How can I move us toward understanding, shared purpose, and productive action?

Great collaboration doesn't require the absence of conflict. It requires the ability to navigate it well.