

The 5 Conflict-Handling Modes: When to Use Each

A one-page desk reference based on the Thomas-Kilmann framework | Management Weekly

Every mode is right *somewhere*. Skilled managers do not have one style - they read the situation (how much does the outcome matter? how much does the relationship matter?) and choose deliberately.

Mode	Stance	Reach for it when...	Overuse looks like...
Competing assertive + uncooperative	I win	Emergencies and safety calls; unpopular but necessary decisions; defending against exploitation.	Yes-people around you; information stops flowing upward; deadlocked relationships.
Collaborating assertive + cooperative	We both win	Both sets of concerns are too important to trade away; you need buy-in; merging different perspectives creates a better answer.	Overkill on trivial issues; endless consensus-seeking; decisions that take weeks.
Compromising mid assertive + mid cooperative	We split it	Moderate stakes with equal power; temporary settlements; time pressure rules out collaboration.	Nobody is ever really satisfied; big issues get 'split' when they deserved real problem-solving.
Avoiding unassertive + uncooperative	No contest (for now)	Trivial issues; you have no chance of winning; letting people cool down buys a better conversation; you need more information first.	Decisions happen by default; issues fester and resurface bigger; team learns problems are unspeakable.
Accommodating unassertive + cooperative	You win	You realise you are wrong; the issue matters far more to them; building goodwill for later; harmony is genuinely more valuable than the point.	Your ideas never get heard; resentment builds; others learn pushing you works.

60-second self-check before any difficult conversation: 1) How important is the *issue* to me (1-10)? 2) How important is the *relationship* (1-10)? 3) Which mode does that point to - and is that the mode I was about to use out of habit?

An original educational summary based on the five conflict-handling modes described by K.W. Thomas and R.H. Kilmann (1974). Not affiliated with, nor a substitute for, the official TKI(R) assessment. Take the free style quiz at managementweekly.org.