

## HANDOUT FOR VIDEO 2: SELF-AWARENESS AND CONFLICT STYLES

This handout accompanies the six-minute video in the Better Conflict exercises from the Conflict Transformation Collaborative at Middlebury. Below, we provide guidance for the self-assessment exercise, a transcript, and additional videos.

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### SELF ASSESSMENT: CONFLICT STYLES

Please take the conflict styles self-assessment at the link below. In 2024-25, we relied on the US Institute of Peace free self-assessment tool. Unfortunately, that website is no longer in service. In Summer 2025, we will be developing our own self-assessment tool. In the meantime, please use the link below.

<https://www.unf.edu/deanofstudents/resolution/conflict-management-styles-assessment.html#>

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### TRANSCRIPT

*Speakers: Sarah Stroup, Mandy Berghela, Teyonce Allison*

*Sarah:* Who am I in conflict? Developing self-awareness is a critical first step for fostering better conflict. The first thing we are going to ask you to do is to take a self-assessment. If you haven't, please pause this video and use this link. The self-assessment takes just three or four minutes. If you have taken the self-assessment, great – let's keep going!

"No two people approach conflict in exactly the same way." Our histories, personality style, level of stress, and context can all shape how we engage in conflict. Why should we pay attention to how we approach conflict? There are at least two reasons.

*Teyonce:* First, sometimes we aren't fighting about "the thing," but clashing over how we approach the thing. Here is an example – some people are very task-oriented, others are very relationally oriented. I am all tasks. If I'm working with someone who really focuses on relationships, it could go something like this: we sit down to work on a problem at work. As we get started, the other person asks me about how my friends are doing and what I did over the weekend.

Each of these well-intended attempts to connect could be interpreted by me as dodging the issue or attempting to manipulate me. Meanwhile, if I get right down to the conflict, the other person might feel like I don't care about them or that I blame them for the problem. Basically, issues can get more difficult to address because of our different approaches.

*Mandy:* We should also reflect on our approaches to conflict because they can be more or less effective. For example, if emotions are running really high, conflict avoidance might be a good call. But over the long term, conflict avoidance can prevent us from addressing the issue.

There is no one best approach to conflict that works in every situation. The goal is to intentionally choose an approach designed to achieve our goals, even if that isn't our conflict "comfort zone."

*Sarah:* The self assessment we use is a version of something called the Thomas Kilmann Instrument or TKI. It was developed in the late 1970s by two professors of management at the University of Pittsburgh. The TKI test is used by the National Institutes of Health, the US Coast Guard, the New York State Bar Association, the Harvard Program on Negotiation, and more.

The TKI distinguishes between high and low assertiveness and high and low cooperativeness. These terms – "assertive" or "cooperative" aren't neutral terms in our language – who wants to be called uncooperative? I like to think about "cooperative" as a measure of how much you are prioritizing the individual versus the collective.

Before we ask you to discuss your self-assessment, let's take a minute to really flesh out why there is no best conflict style. Assertiveness and cooperativeness each have advantages and disadvantages.

*Teyonce:* When is it good to be highly assertive? Assertiveness is best in a few situations - when you need fast decision-making, when it's ethically right to take a stand, or if you've tried amicable means of conflict management and they haven't worked. High assertiveness can help make a clear point and lead to faster decision-making.

However, there are some downsides. A highly assertive person is unlikely to be challenged, and their colleagues may end up acting as yes men. If that happens, then valuable new information may not be sought. In addition, if someone is highly assertive on multiple issues, it may not be clear which is the most important priority.

*Mandy:* What about cooperativeness, that idea of tending not just to the individual but to the collective group? High cooperativeness makes sense when you have a lot of perspectives that might all contain some truth - or perhaps someone else's ideas are better than yours! Being highly cooperative is also important when you really care about the relationship. It can also reduce the chance that there will be backlash - that people will try to undermine your work down the road.

But cooperativeness also has disadvantages. If you go into a situation assuming that everyone is interested in working together, this can be exploited by people who actually like the fight. Amanda Ripley called these conflict entrepreneurs – they benefit from the conflict. Also, if you just assume that everyone wants to work together, you might miss some real resistance or anger from your colleagues. Finally, cooperation and collaboration takes time.

*Sarah:* OK. Now it's your turn to think about your conflict style. Using the results from self assessment, you can think about these questions on your own or with a partner.

First, share one thing that you see in your self assessment that seems true for you and might be helpful for a colleague to know. Second, think about when your style is more or less effective.

Identify a situation in which you think your conflict style may have been helpful in addressing the situation. Then identify a time where your conflict approach may not have been helpful.

Remember- the goal is to not put you in a box or offer *the* definitive statement on how you approach conflict. This exercise invites each of us to reflect on what might be our default approach. If our default doesn't help us achieve our goals, we might need to step out of that comfort zone.

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## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The Stone, Patton, Heen book is short, very affordable, and easy to read. The website of the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument also has a lot of free resources (see link below).

Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen, *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most*. Penguin Press, revised 2023

<https://kilmanndiagnostics.com/overview-thomas-kilmann-conflict-mode-instrument-tki/>

Barry Kroll, *The Open Hand: Arguing as an Art of Peace*. University Press of Colorado, 2013.

Bernard Mayer, *The Dynamics of Conflict*. Wiley, 2012. See especially Chapter 2.

Michael Roloff and Courtney Wright, "Social Cognition and Conflict," *The Sage Handbook of Conflict Communication*, J. G. Oetzel, S. Ting-Toomey, editors, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Sage Publications, 2013.



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