

2.5: Dealing with Conflict- Different Approaches

Every individual or group manages conflict differently. In the 1970s, consultants Kenneth W. Thomas and Ralph H. Kilmann developed a tool for analyzing the approaches to conflict resolution. This tool is called the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI) (Kilmann Diagnostics, 2017).

Essential Learning Activity T2.5.1:

For information on the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument, see the [Kilmann Diagnostics](#) website.

Thomas and Kilmann suggest that in a conflict situation, a person's behaviour can be assessed on two factors:

1. **Commitment to goals or assertiveness**—the extent to which an individual (or a group) attempts to satisfy his or her own concerns or goals.
2. **Commitment to relationships or cooperation**—the extent to which an individual (or a group) attempts to satisfy the concerns of the other party, and the importance of the relationship with the other party.

Thomas and Kilmann use these factors to explain the five different approaches to dealing with conflict:

avoiding	competing	accommodating	compromising	collaborating
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There is an appropriate time to use each approach in dealing with conflict. While most people will use different methods in various circumstances, we all tend to have a more dominant approach that feels most comfortable. One approach is not necessarily better than another and all approaches can be learned and utilized. To most effectively deal with conflict, it is important to analyze the situation and determine which approach is most appropriate.

Let's take a closer look at each approach and when to use it.

Avoiding

An avoidance approach demonstrates a low commitment to both goals and relationships. This is the most common method of dealing with conflict, especially by people who view conflict negatively.

Table 2.5.1: Avoiding

Types of Avoidance	Results	Appropriate When
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Physical flight Mental withdrawal Changing the subject Blaming or minimizing Denial that the problem exists Postponement to a more appropriate time (which may never occur) Use of emotions (tears, anger, etc.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The dispute is not resolved. Disputes often build up and eventually explode. Low satisfaction results in complaining, discontentment, and talking back. Stress spreads to other parties (e.g., co-workers, family). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The issue is trivial or unimportant, or another issue is more pressing Potential damage outweighs potential benefits Timing for dealing with the conflict is inappropriate (because of overwhelming emotions or lack of information)

Application to Nursing—Avoidance

When might avoidance be an appropriate approach to conflict in a hospital or clinic setting?

In a hospital or clinical setting, there may be times when it is appropriate to avoid conflict. For example, on a particularly busy day in the emergency room, when a patient in life-threatening condition has just been received, the attending doctor may bark directions at the assisting nurses to get equipment. The nurses may feel offended by the doctor's actions; however, it may be appropriate for the nurses to avoid the conflict at that moment given the emergency situation. The nurse, if he or she felt it was inappropriate behavior by the doctor, could then deal with the conflict after the patient has been stabilized.

When might avoidance be an inappropriate approach to conflict in a hospital or clinic setting?

Avoiding the conflict may be inappropriate if that same doctor continues to bark directions at the nursing staff in non-emergency situations, such as during debrief of a surgery, or when communicating non-emergency instructions. When the nurses and doctor have to continue a working relationship, avoiding the continuing conflict will no longer be appropriate.

Competing

A competing approach to conflict demonstrates a high commitment to goals and a low commitment to relationships. Individuals who use the competing approach pursue their own goals at the other party's expense. People taking this approach will use whatever power is necessary to win. It may display as defending a position, interest, or value that you believe to be correct. Competing approaches are often supported by structures (courts, legislatures, sales quotas, etc.) and can be initiated by the actions of one party. Competition may be appropriate or inappropriate (as defined by the expectations of the relationship).

Table 2.5.2: Competing

Types of Competing	Results	Appropriate When
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Power of authority, position, or majority Power of persuasion Pressure techniques (e.g., threats, force, intimidation) Disguising the issue Tying relationship issues to substantive issues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The conflict may escalate or the other party may withdraw. Reduces the quality and durability of agreement. Assumes no reciprocating power will come from the other side; people tend to reach for whatever power they have when threatened. Increases the likelihood of future problems between parties. Restricts communication and decreases trust. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There are short time frames and quick action is vital. Dealing with trivial issues. Tough decisions require leadership (e.g., enforcing unpopular rules, cost cutting, discipline).

Application to Nursing—Competing

When might a competing approach to conflict be appropriate in a hospital or clinic setting?

A completing approach to conflict may be appropriate in a hospital or clinic setting if you recognize that another nurse has made an error in how much medication to administer to a patient. You recognize this mistake prior to the nurse entering the patient's room so you approach the nurse, take the medication out of his or her hands, and place the correct dosage. The goal of patient safety outweighs the commitment to the relationship with that nurse in this case.

When might a competing approach to conflict be inappropriate in a hospital or clinic setting?

It would be inappropriate to continue to be competitive when you debrief with the nurse about the dangers of medication errors and the system of double checking dosage amounts. The goal at this point is to enhance the learning of that nurse as well as to build trust in your relationship as colleagues. A different approach is needed.

Accommodating

Accommodating demonstrates a low commitment to goals and high commitment to relationship. This approach is the opposite of competing. It occurs when a person ignores or overrides their own concerns to satisfy the concerns of the other party. An accommodating approach is used to establish reciprocal adaptations or adjustments. This could be a hopeful outcome for those who take an accommodating approach, but when the other party does not reciprocate, conflict can result. Others may view those who use the accommodating approach heavily as "that is the way they are" and don't need anything in return. Accommodators typically will not ask for anything in return. Accommodators tend to get resentful when a reciprocal relationship isn't established. Once resentment grows, people who rely on the accommodating approach often shift to a competing approach because they are tired of being "used." This leads to confusion and conflict.

Table 2.5.3: Accommodating

Types of Accommodating	Results	Appropriate When

Types of Accommodating	Results	Appropriate When
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Playing down the conflict to maintain surface harmony Self-sacrifice Yielding to the other point of view 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Builds relationships that will allow you to be more effective in future problem solving Increases the chances that the other party may be more accommodating to your needs in the future Does not improve communication 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> You are flexible on the outcome, or when the issue is more important to the other party. Preserving harmony is more important than the outcome. It's necessary to build up good faith for future problem solving. You are wrong or in a situation where competition could damage your position.

Application to Nursing—Accommodation

When might accommodation be an appropriate approach to conflict in a hospital or clinic setting?

It may be appropriate to use an accommodating approach when, for example, one of the nurses on your shift has a particularly difficult patient who is taking up a lot of time and effort. Seeing that the nurse is having difficulty, you take on some of her or his tasks. This increases your workload for a period of time, but it allows your colleague the time needed to deal with the difficult patient.

When might accommodation be an inappropriate approach to conflict in a hospital or clinic setting?

This approach may no longer be appropriate if that same nurse expects you to continue to cover his or her tasks after the situation with the difficult patient has been resolved.

Compromising

A compromising approach strikes a balance between a commitment to goals and a commitment to relationships. The objective of a compromising approach is a quick solution that will work for both parties. Usually it involves both parties giving up something and meeting in the middle. Compromising is often used in labour negotiations, as typically there are multiple issues to resolve in a short period of time.

Table 2.5.4: Compromising

Types of Compromising	Results	Appropriate When
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Splitting the difference Exchanging concessions Finding middle ground 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Both parties may feel they lost the battle and feel the need to get even next time. No relationship is established although it should also not cause relationship to deteriorate. Danger of stalemate Does not explore the issue in any depth 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Time pressures require quick solutions. Collaboration or competition fails. Short-term solutions are needed until more information can be obtained.

Application to Nursing—Compromise

When might compromise be an appropriate approach to conflict in a hospital or clinic setting?

You are currently on shift with another nurse that does the bare minimum and rarely likes to help his or her colleagues out. It is two hours since lunch and one of your hyperglycemic patients have not received their lunch tray. You approach your colleague and ask him or her to go look for the tray while you draw blood from a patient for them. The other nurse agrees as he or she has been having difficulty with the patient that needs a blood draw.

When might a compromise be an inappropriate approach to conflict in a hospital or clinic setting?

It would be inappropriate to continue to ask the nurse to do tasks for you that are less appealing than the tasks you take on.

Collaborating

Collaborating is an approach that demonstrates a high commitment to goals and also a high commitment to relationships. This approach is used in an attempt to meet concerns of all parties. Trust and willingness for risk is required for this approach to be effective.

Table 2.5.5: Collaborating

Type of Collaborating	Results	Appropriate When
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Maximizing use of fixed resources Working to increase resources Listening and communicating to promote understanding of interests and values Learning from each other's insight 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Builds relationships and improves potential for future problem solving Promotes creative solutions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parties are committed to the process and adequate time is available. The issue is too important to compromise. New insights can be beneficial in achieving creative solutions. There is a desire to work through hard feelings that have been a deterrent to problem solving. There are diverse interests and issues at play. Participants can be future focused.

Application to Nursing—Collaboration

When might collaboration be an appropriate approach to conflict in a hospital or clinic setting?

It may be appropriate to use collaboration in a hospital or clinic setting when discussing vacation cover off with team members at a team meeting. During a team meeting, time is available to discuss and focus on what is important for each member of the team.

When might collaboration be an inappropriate approach to conflict in a hospital or clinic setting?

Collaboration would be inappropriate in a discussion of a new policy that has been put in place if the team has little influence in making adjustments.

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