

The Relationship Between Conflict Management Styles  
and Kirton's Adaption-Innovation Theory

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## **Abstract**

The objective of this paper is to analyze connections between individuals' preferred problem-solving style and common conflict management techniques. Five common themes/styles were reoccurring in academic literature concerning conflict management techniques. The techniques of avoidance, collaboration, competing, compromising, and accommodation were the most prevalent in literature. Kirton's Adaption Innovation (A-I) theory creates a foundation for this paper outlining preferred problem-solving styles. Kirton's theory outlines the way individuals prefer to solve complex problems, and the behaviors used in order to work in collaboration. Using literature, conclusions were drawn that there are possible connections between both phenomena. Connection between both phenomena include similar processes, and use of collaboration as a key component to successfully create robust solutions. These two processes worked seamlessly with Kirton's concepts of Problem A and B. These two processes outline and detail the cause and effect of conflicts created by working with others in the realm of collaboration. This review suggests future research propositions, creating a springboard for further research.

**Keywords:** Conflict Management, Adaption Innovation Theory, Coping Behaviors, Collaboration

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

While working with others in any capacity, conflicts are bound to take place (Bacal, 2004). Conflict is an inevitable component of human activity (Brahnam et al., 2005). These disagreements were once perceived as a major negative in the team work process. According to past research, conflicts are responsible for unorganized and careless behavior of employees within an organization and therefore, considered as an avoidable and destructive constraint for the organization to be removed or reduced (Khan et al., 2016). Intragroup conflict is a common occurrence that can have major ramifications over production and outcomes if not handled with the proper attention. Conflict can be defined as a state of significant dispute about something which is considered or perceived important by the party and the other party disagrees (Schramm-Nielsen, 2002). The focus of this study is conflicts between individuals working in teams.

The causes of conflict between individuals range from differences in project objectives, values, personality, and even needs. Conflicts are sensitive and need to be handled constructively and productively. In such a manner that the parties involved are willing to move past such disagreements. These types of issues between members need to be handled not only for the sake of company and organizational outcome, but the well-being of all individuals involved. It's important that conflict not lead to emotional stress affecting other aspects of the individuals involved. Resolving conflict and maintaining emotional wellbeing of people involved will be critical to successful conflict management (Mills & Mene, 2020). It's important for those set out to manage conflict to understand the entire scope of the issue, and utilize the most effective techniques to create possible solutions.

New ideas surrounding the subject of conflict have allowed for new opportunities for growth and development. Conflict is now understood to be either destructive or constructive depending on the situation and how it is managed (Flanagan & Ruden, 2008). The main advantage of constructive conflict is that it enables individuals the opportunities to identify the problems and seek solutions. Also, it can inspire the creation of new ideas, learning, and growth among individuals (Kinicki & Kreitner, 2008). With this new positive twist to thinking there has been an uptick in the interest surrounding conflict management techniques. There has been a phenomenal increase in the interest on conflict resolution in recent days (Aula & Siira, 2010).

Conflict management techniques help facilitate solutions between opposing parties during a dispute (Mills & Mene, 2020). These techniques are used to provide the best possible resolution to issues depending on the unique factors of the situation. These techniques allow for better communication, team building, and the creation of a positive work environment. Properly managed conflicts result in better quality products, better decision making, more innovation, and enhanced performance (Brahnam et al., 2005). Those who are assigned the responsibility to address conflict will need to have the skills needed to address the conflicts as well as the effects of conflicts. The causes of conflict are unique, which creates the need for various techniques for resolution. Managers, supervisors, employers and leaders should use different types of conflict management styles when facing different kinds of subordinates, employees, and team members (Huan & Yazdanifard, 2012).

Kirton's (2011) Adaption-Innovation Theory can be used to take a deeper dive into conflict management and style. The KAI was developed in 1976 and is centered around the idea of thinking or cognitive style, often referred to as problem-solving style. This theory looks at the way that individuals think and choose to solve problems. This theory explores and describes

individual preferences in the way humans solve problems, either adaptively or innovatively. In addition to the theory, Kirton developed a related psychometric inventory that locates an individual's style on a continuum ranging from high adaptation to high innovation. The Theory is centered around the fact that all people are creative and have the ability to solve problems. Problem-solving style is just the way individuals choose to execute this process. This process, if managed correctly, can lead to diversity of ideas, and more robust solutions.

### **Definition of Keywords**

**Adaptive** - the cognitive preference for effecting change by initially accepting the current, consensually-agreed-upon structure and using it to create a solution, thereby prudently altering the structure for later improved use (Kirton, 2011).

**Conflict** - Conflict is defined as a state of significant dispute about something which is considered or perceived important by the one party and the other party disagrees (Schramm-Nielsen, 2002).

**Conflict management** - Conflict management seeks to resolve the disagreement or conflict with positive outcomes that satisfy all individuals involved or is beneficial to the group (Ronquillo, Ellis, & Toney-Butler, 2022)

**Innovative** - the cognitive preference for tending, more riskily, to first alter the structure in order to solve a problem, which then effects further change (Kirton, 2011).

**Kirton's A-I Theory** - Is Founded on the assumption that all people solve problems and are creative. Is the stable, preferred style within which individuals solve problems; it relates to the way people manage cognitive structure. Both potential capacity (intelligence or talent) and learned levels (such as management competence) are completely independent characteristics and assessed by other measures (Kirton, 2011).

**Coping Behavior** - One's ability to address current problems in their non- preferred way along the two axes of intensity as well as duration (Kirton, 2011)

**Collaboration** - To work jointly with others or together especially in an intellectual endeavor (Merriam-Webster, 2024).

### **Statement of Problem**

In summary, conflict is a universal and unavoidable phenomenon that occurs between individuals and in groups and teams. There are several causes of conflict, including role conflicts, interpersonal conflicts, task conflicts and power conflicts. Conflict should be managed constructively and productively for the success of the individuals, groups, or teams involved. Conflict management techniques facilitate success in various ways. Kirton's Adaption-Innovation theory provides a framework for understanding conflict resolution possibilities. However, there has been no literature that explores the possible relationship between conflict management techniques and KAI. Thus, the research questions for this project were, "What are the existing techniques available concerning conflict management? And how might they relate to KAI theory?"

### **Purpose of the Project**

The purpose of this qualitative literature review was to evaluate conflict management techniques and how individuals may manage conflict based on their preferred cognitive style. Audiences, such as managerial, organizational, and individuals involved in collaboration can benefit from the information gathered for this project. Managerial audiences can potentially use this information to help assist in team formation and unsure diversity among ideas to create robust outcomes. Organizations can use this information to promote more effective collaboration and to increase trust, relations, and organizational production. Finally, this information can be

useful to individuals who are working with others. This information can provide self-awareness and decrease common causes of conflict associated with collaboration, thus increasing productivity.

### **Project Objectives**

The primary objective of this project is to evaluate relevant conflict management techniques presented in academic literature. Secondly, we look to analyze connections associated with conflict management techniques with the Kirton's Adaption and Innovation Inventory. Lastly, the project presents findings, and offers recommendations for future research.



## **Chapter 2: Project Design and Methodology**

To complete this project and write the report, I decided to employ a qualitative research design to perform a literature review. In this section, I describe the design, explain the methodology, and outline the steps I took to generate and analyze the data for the project.

### **Design**

Qualitative research is a non-linear design of research that focuses on the who, what, why, how of research. This specific type of research looks to explore a central idea or concept. Participant's ideals and perspectives are at the forefront of data collection and interpretation. An entirely different model of research process than the traditional ones offered in most textbooks (Grady &Walston, 1988). Qualitative research generally asks more broad questions, and looks to decipher the meaning and discover any themes. Finally, qualitative research interprets information by drawing on previous studies and personal reflections to draw more robust conclusions.

Qualitative Research was created in the early 1930s by Paul Felix Lazarsfeld "The Father of Research Surveys" (Maxwell, 2008). It's distinguished from quantitative research due to its nonlinear design and lack of numeric results that can be analyzed mathematically. The design is ever refocusing and evolving as new information and data becomes available. The researcher may need to reconsider or modify any design decisions during the study in response to new developments or changes in some other aspect of the design (Maxwell, 2008). This style of research has a focus on the personal connections and interpretations of the data vs numerical data.

Pathak, Nijauin and Kalra in their 2013 paper Qualitative Research state that qualitative methodology is used to understand people's beliefs, experiences, attitudes, behavior, and interactions. The purpose of this style of research is to bring a human approach to research and discovery of a specific question or phenomenon. Qualitative research focuses on understanding a research query as a humanistic or idealistic approach (Pathak, Bijauini, & Kalra, 2013). This style of research became more recognized after researchers discovered it allows for a more extensive view of presented data. Researchers are now able to collect data, consider and interpret personal perspectives, and acknowledge themes presented in the findings. Qualitative research is now recognized for its ability to add a new dimension to interventional studies that cannot be obtained through measurement of variables alone (Pathak, Bijauini, & Kalra, 2013).

Qualitative Research starts its process with a key concept or phenomenon (Maxwell, 2008). This concept then takes the form of research questions and sub-questions. These questions are fluid and are ever changing and evolving with the process of the research. These questions are generally broad and leave room for participant interpretation. The next major facet of the qualitative research process is the method. These methods range from five traditions. Traditions include narrative, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case studies. Once the appropriate tradition is selected researchers follow similar dimensions of project focus, data collection, data analysis, and narrative form.

Data collection takes form in many different ways (Creswell & Clark, 2004). Observations, interviewing participants, and audio-visual materials as all used for data collection and research. The data is then interpreted and used to find themes within the data. Analyzes and codes the data for description and themes, interprets the meaning of the information drawing on personal reflections and past research (Creswell & Clark, 2004). Lastly, researchers are tasked

with drawing out results and interpretation of the information presented. Interprets the meaning of the information drawing on personal research and past research and writes a final report that includes personal basis and a flexible structure (Creswell & Clark, 2004).

### **Project Methodology - Literature Review**

A literature review is an academic document that utilizes the comprehension and mastery of past and current academic literature on a selected topic in connection with one another (Machi & McEvoy, 2009). This document will analyze the current information available from several scholarly sources, connect them, and use these connections to draw conclusions or present findings. A literature critique interprets the current understanding of the research topic and logically determines how this knowledge answers the research questions.

Literature reviews are used to identify and clarify a topic (Machi & McEvoy, 2009). The topic or subject is presented in research questions which are fluid and reshaped through the literature review process. Literature reviews then are used to present data and information to the audience. Literature reviews lastly, report findings, project limitations, and present plans for future research and possible next steps.

This literature review was used in this project as a means to utilize and combine previous research from two different fields. This review allowed for review of several different academic documents in search of relevant information. Once information was reviewed and gathered, understanding of the current state of research could be achieved. This also allowed confirmation that little, if any, past or current research exists pertaining to the selected topic. Research questions were redefined with the utilization of additional data and analysis to produce the final report.

This literature review allowed for two different fields of research to be combined together to examine how they interact with one another. We could examine if KAI and cognitive style had any effect on how individuals chose to handle conflict. The literature review is being used as a way to review methods and approaches used in different studies tying them together around one central idea. Ideas from scholarly articles from both fields will be presented in the literature review. It will provide the audience with some base knowledge about the importance of the topic. We can then present this information to our expert KAI panel, which will allow for a more specialized review of the collected data. We then will use the literature review to share limitations, lay out the findings, and discuss possible future research.

### **Data Collection**

First research for the top conflict management techniques presented in literature in the last 50 years. Google scholar and the Virginia Tech databases of scholarly documents were utilized to search for relevant journal articles. Keywords and search terms included “conflict management techniques.” Search results yielded 5,660,000 results via Google Scholar. The first article chosen for review provided a foundation for the future search. *A Review of Conflict Management Techniques in Projects* by Author Goparaju Sudhakar yielded a top 20 causes for conflict and top 20 conflict management techniques presented in academic literature. These techniques were ranked by the amount of times they were mentioned in academic documents. Using this ranking system as well as provided references, I was able to pinpoint specific articles to gather information on selected conflict management techniques. This article provided the conflict management technique, the articles and name of researcher, and ranked them by the number by occurrences in academic literature.

I returned to the VT library and Google Scholar to search these terms individually to find the articles and any missing information. New search terms included key words such as “compromising conflict management techniques.” All five conflict management techniques presented were individually searched using Google Scholar and the VT library. Relevant articles were selected to be added to the annotated bibliography. Next, I used the Virginia tech scholarly document library to research conflict. I searched with phrases such as “what is conflict?”, “Effects of conflict”, “Conflict management techniques' ". These search terms yielded over 500,000 scholarly articles. I used the third article such as (Bacal, 2004) to gather information about conflict and associated questions.

Lastly, *Adaption-Innovation In the Context of Diversity and Change* by M.J Kirton (2011) was used for information regarding the KAI Theory. The Table of Contents provided specific sections of where to find information. I examined the work and identified several chapters that were relevant including Chapters 4 Style and Personality Theory, 5 Structure and Cognition. Highlighted pertinent information and added to project outline. Chapter 7 Style, Level, Process, and Technique and Chapter 10 Management of Cognitive Gap are used to add more detailed information and data to be added to the outline. The results yielded for the top conflict management techniques were then placed in a document and used for an outline for the rest of the paper. Lastly, I was able to read all the information and draw some insightful conclusions.

### **Chapter 3: Literature Review**

This paper seeks to discover popular conflict management techniques presented in scholarly literature and to evaluate those techniques according to Kirton's Adaption and Innovation theory. This paper aims to discover possible connections between preferred problem-solving style and behaviors associated with conflict management techniques. How is conflict defined in academic literature? What are the most common causes of conflict; what are the effects of poorly managed conflicts? Next, I will shift focus to the common conflict management styles that can be applied to productively solve conflict. Styles include avoidance, compromising, collaboration, accommodating, and competing. Then, I will analyze Kirton Adaption Innovation Theory, by first defining important themes within the theory such as Kirton's problem A and Problem B, cognitive gap, and coping behaviors. Lastly, I will discover connections between conflict management style and Kirton's A-I theory. Using these connections, I will draw conclusions and provide suggested research propositions. This paper can be used to further bring awareness to the importance of understanding one's cognitive thinking style. It can also help those in leadership positions effectively utilize the appropriate management techniques to solve conflicts based on situations.

#### **Conflict**

Conflict is a natural component of individuals working in a team environment (Thakore, 2013). It is unavoidable and a necessary part of the teaming process. Conflict is the outcome of behavior. It can be defined as a disagreement between two or more individuals or groups with each individual or group trying to gain acceptance of their view over others (Thakore, 2013). It involves the expression of contradictory viewpoints between different groups or individuals. Conflicts can be observed on many levels including the individual, team, and organizational.

Conflict on the individual level can be observed on a smaller level as disagreement between two individuals. Team conflict is an intermediate stage of conflict. This level includes individuals working in small groups or disagreements between multiple people. Lastly, organizational conflict is the largest level of conflict. This conflict included large scales of individuals and will require bigger change to cure disagreements and disputes.

Flanagan and Ruden (2008) point to two main types of conflict, task and relationship. Task conflict is centered around how to solve issues in differences of ideals and viewpoints. This is a way to view conflict as a positive term. Task conflict focuses on how to solve issues created by differences. Researchers have discovered that conflict will result in creativity and improved decision making (Lim & Yazdanifard, 2012). Relationship conflict points to the differences in values, norms, and experiences. This type of conflict has a negative connotation and can produce insufficient communication. Researchers have shown that relationship conflict lowers the productivity and motivation amongst team members (Lim & Yazdanifard, 2012).

Flanagan and Runde (2008) describe task conflict as conflict that focuses on how to solve the problems caused by differences. This has created a positive attitude surrounding this style. This type of conflict is known for its open and robust discussion of issues. Research has concluded that task conflict has been attached to improved decision making and heightened creativity. Relationship conflict or affective conflict is less about solving problems and more about finding someone to blame. This has yielded to negative ideas surrounding this style. Research points to lower productivity in teams and poorer quality decisions. The obvious recommendation by scholars is to have more task conflict and less relationship. Although this is the intention of all collaborative efforts, these efforts often fall short because what starts out as a task can easily turn to a relationship. Misinterpreted criticisms can quickly shift the type of

conflict from task to relationship. To benefit from the upside of tasks and decrease the issues that are presented during relationships, individuals need to foster open communication, encourage discussion, and keep others feeling comfortable.

This phenomenon has been studied for centuries by some of the great minds in the field, yielding many different ideals surrounding the topic. Conflict has been observed through history as both a positive and negative to the teaming process. The ideals of its process are still debated in research. Conflict is natural and inevitable in all organizations and that it may have either a positive or a negative effect, depending on how the conflict is handled (Verma, 1998).

Throughout literature there has been support of both viewpoints concerning the effects of conflict. Scholars such as Bacal (2004) acknowledge the traditional view of conflict and its negative connotation as a distractor. Mills et al. (2020) describe the negative effects of conflict. Conflict is capable of destroying the goals of individuals and organizations. When conflict hinders expected performance, it is deemed negative or destructive. Negative conflicts may also increase underutilization of resources and reduce productivity.

Scholars such as Bohannan (1967) and Baron (1991) have pointed to a more positive outlook to conflict. Conflict to be as basic as culture is in society, which possibly controlled and utilized profitably for better cultural development and maintenance of social order (Bohannan, 1967). Baron (1991) touches on some of the positive outcomes that have been overlooked. Initially conflict serves to bring attention to issues that have been neglected to the forefront. Recognition plays an important role in the problem-solving process. Conflict also encourages the consideration of new ideas and approaches. Conflict can help facilitate innovation and change. Lastly, serious conflict when groups can lead to increased loyalty and cohesiveness. Lastly,



scholars such as Schellenberg (1996) reside somewhere in the middle. Conflict is neither bad nor good, but one of the essentials in human social life.

### **Causes for Conflicts**

Regardless of the different types of conflict, either task or relationship, there are endless possibilities to the specific causes for conflict between individuals. This is mainly dependent on the situation. Hotepo et al. (2010) discusses common causes for conflict. This research cites role conflicts, interpersonal conflicts, task conflicts and power conflicts as the most common cases of conflict. Role conflicts arise when there is dispute over one's role in an organization or team. Interpersonal conflicts appear when an individual is experiencing personal stress. Task conflicts are examples of individuals' uncertainty about what they are expected to do. Power conflicts surface when groups are placed against each other in order to achieve their own selfish goals. These varying causes make conflict unavoidable, but also increase the need for it to be properly managed.

There are many ideals presented in literature around the inception of conflict that range from DNA and innate human behavior to socialization and societies influence over interaction. Scholars such as Schellernberg (1996) focus more on the individual themselves rather than the context of his acts. Schellernberg describes the approach of individual characteristic theory. This theory focuses on the individual and his acts, rather than the context of the act. Scholars such as Katz (1965) venture to dig deeper, to pinpoint reasoning outside of the individual's innate behaviors. Through his research, he created a typology that identifies three main causes of conflict: economic, value, and power. Economic conflict involves desires to acquire scarce resources. Typically this occurs when behavior and emotions of each party are aimed at increasing their own gain (Smiley, 2018). Individuals may become involved in disputes as a

result of trying to secure the majority of these resources. Value conflict comes from differences in norms and ideals of life. It involves incompatibility in ways of life, ideologies – the preferences, principles and practices that people believe in (Katz, 1965). Value conflict is not fact based, but belief based which makes it tough to resolve. Lastly, power conflict points to the struggle for power and status. Power Conflict occurs when each party tries to exert and maintain its maximum influence in the relationship and social setting

### **Effects of Conflict**

The effects of conflict can differ based on various factors. Literature points to both negative and positive outcomes. Channeling conflict in a positive or negative way may affect the nature of the conflict whether beneficial or destructive (Cetin & Hacifazlioglu, 2004). Khan (2016) suggests conflict in the minds of individuals is considered as a negative which hinders goals, and provides resistance to success. Individuals are likely to experience some psychological situations which decrease their work performance, decline in work interest, job dissatisfaction, work stress, frustration (Khan, 2016). This tends to be the traditional view of conflict from the early 1900s, which indicates that conflict is an undesirable phenomenon. Poorly managed and avoided conflict can lead to many barriers affecting goal achievement. The direct consequence of unresolved conflict is a barrier to communication between team members (Huan & Yazdanifard, 2012).

Contrary to the traditional view of conflict is the interactionist viewpoint, which recognizes conflict as potentially positive and useful. When conflict is recognized, acknowledged and managed in proper manner, personal and organizational benefits accrue (Darling & Fogliasso, 1999). Conflict can have very grand benefits. Bagshaw (1987) talks about the possibility of using differences in opinions and ideals to increase innovation and spark future

progression. Conflict can be a creative force for the business and the individual, because if we regard differences of opinion as valuable sources of cross-fertilization, they begin to enrich our experience (Bagshaw, 1998, p. 206). Khan (2016) states how conflict can increase performance. Conflict can be utilized to achieve the highest level of performance and increase efficiency in decision making. Conflict can be positive and very effective in task-oriented conflicts because of useful criticism. With new ideas surrounding the perception of conflict as a positive, it becomes more important to focus on ways to use conflict as an advantage. All conflicts are not equal and are dependent on many factors.

### **Conflict Management**

Conflict management embodies the strategies and techniques created to resolve conflicts between individuals. All organizations, however simple or complex, possess a range of mechanisms or procedures for managing conflict (Thakore, 2013). Mills (2020) expresses that conflict management has a wide range of applications. He states that conflict management be emphasized due to its possibilities of yielding positive outcomes. Mills touches on the importance of creating safe spaces where opinions and suggestions are encouraged without fear. When properly managed, conflict provides the opportunity for growth and new ideas. This will ultimately increase the bonds between individuals and strengthen society as a whole.

Burton (1987) approaches conflict management from an organizational viewpoint. A significant feature of conflict management is that it is an attempt by the status quo to manage the dispute, or to avoid escalation of the conflict, conflict resolution refers to dealing with or removing the cause of the conflict (Burton, 1987). The causes of conflict are ever changing, thus creating a need for fluid and evolving management techniques. Managing organizational conflict is as varied as its causes, origins and contexts (Thakore, 2013). Thakore (2013) stresses the

importance of two structures within the conflict management process. One, containing the destructive components (e.g. hostility, use of violence), and two, creating a satisfactory and acceptable solution to conflict. Effective conflict management aims to achieve an acceptable solution with limited disruptions. The success or effectiveness of such procedures can be gauged by the extent to which they limit conflict behavior and the extent to which they help to achieve a satisfactory solution (Thakore, 2013).

### **Conflict Management Techniques**

There are many different ways that individuals choose to handle conflict and disputes. When conflict is introduced between two individuals or in a team setting it is important that it is handled in the proper manner, one that can lend to a positive impact. There are many styles and techniques available to solve conflict, but past writers and literature point to five important ways conflict can be managed successfully. Sudhakar (2015) ranked the top conflict management techniques by the number of times it was referenced in literature: (1) Avoidance, (2) Compromise, (3) Confronting, (4) Accommodating, and (5) Collaborating (see Figure 1, below). These conflict management styles are presented and referred to by different names throughout literature and scholarly articles, but the main components remain the same.

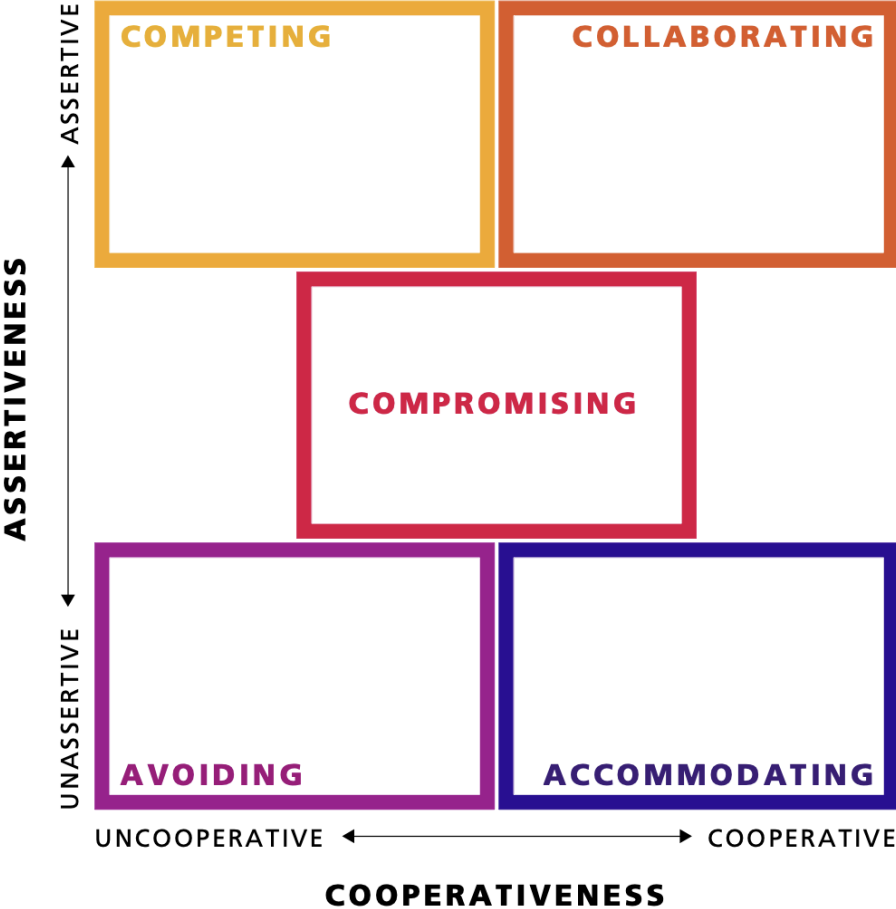
These conflict management styles were developed by Thomas and Kilmann (1974) as part of their conflict resolution instrument, The Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI). (1974) touches on how there is not one best style for solving conflict. All 5 modes are useful in some situations, and represent a set of useful social skills aimed at managing conflict. The effectiveness of a given conflict-handling mode depends on the specific situation and the skill with which an individual uses that mode. Individuals are capable of all five conflict-handling modes, and do not have a single rigid style of dealing with conflict.

## **Avoiding or Withdrawal**

The avoidance and withdrawal is the first part of the Thomas and Kilmann Instrument developed in 1978. Sudhakar (2015) states avoidance/withdrawal is the most mentioned conflict management style in academic literature, being referenced 27 different times in scholarly articles. This conflict management style is used to prevent undesirable actions or confrontations that may occur during disputes. Rahim, Antonion, and Psenicka (2001) categorize avoidance and withdrawal as actions aimed at preventing by-products of confrontation and arguing. Individuals who stay away from conflict and in many cases try to ignore conflict altogether. Avoiding has the potential to be very disruptive and could leave conflict unresolved. In this style of conflict resolution, one party is indifferent to feelings of the other party and one party keeps away from participating in conflict at all (Barki & Hartwick, 2001).

**Figure 1**

The Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI)



\*This two-dimensional model of conflict-handling behavior is adapted from "Conflict and Conflict Management" by Kenneth Thomas in *The Handbook of Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, edited by Marvin Dunnette (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1976). Another valuable contribution in this field is the work by Robert Blake and Jane Mouton in *The Managerial Grid* (Houston: Gulf Publishing, 1964, 1994).

Avoiding/withdrawal style of conflict management is very common, but may only create temporary relief to disputes. It leaves the conflict unresolved and creates anger or frustration in either or both parties to the dispute and it propagates further conflict. This could create a lose-lose situation where both parties feel unsatisfied with the outcome, thus leading to more

conflict. Vokic and Sontor (2009) suggest avoidance and withdrawal might take the form of sidestepping or working around an issue, postponement of an issue until a later and better, or simply walking away from a situation deemed as threatening. Thomas (2008) classifies avoidance as an unassertive and uncooperative style where individuals ignore the concerns of others as well as themselves. This is a style where individuals do not address conflict at all.

Rahim (2002) suggests that avoidance and withdrawal are best used when individuals feel the issue is small or unimportant. This style of avoidance can create a cooling off period, or create a buffer between parties when the effects of confrontation potentially outweigh the benefits of resolution. This style should be avoided if individuals feel strongly about an issue or a swift decision is needed.

### **Compromising**

The compromising style of conflict management is a more intermediate style identified by Thomas and Kilmann in 1974. Compromising style of conflict management displays both assertive and cooperative behaviors. This style is the second most referenced style in academic literature, being mentioned 26 times in scholarly articles Sudhakar (2015). Thomas (2008) cites compromising as the middle ground of the five conflict management styles concerning assertiveness and cooperativeness. This style falls in the center of competition and accommodation. Individuals will sacrifice more outcomes vs the competing style, but will gain more outcomes than the accommodating style. Compromising will also be more direct when in disputes vs the avoiding style, but won't explore the dispute to the depths of a collaboration. The compromising style means landing in the middle of individuals exchanging concessions.

With Compromising the goal is to find an acceptable middle ground between opposing parties (Vokić & Sontor, 2009). The objective is to find an expedient, mutually acceptable

solution that partially satisfies both parties (Thomas, 2008). When is the preferred style for conflict management individuals in a dispute can expect a no-win/no-lose resolution. Both parties will have to be willing to give something up to reach an outcome that is mutually beneficial. Vokic and Sontor (2009) associate compromise as a give-and-take middle-ground solution.

Rahim (2002) declares the compromising style is best used in situations where parties have equal power and their goals are mutually exclusive. This style can be suitable to provide quick temporary solutions to complex problems. Compromising can also be elected when consensus cannot be reached. This middle ground prevents parties from achieving all their needs, thus making it difficult in situations when one party is more powerful than another.

Compromising may also not be suitable when issues are very complex. The quick sometimes temporary approach to the style may not yield such results in issues requiring deeper problem solving.

### **Collaboration (Integrating, Problem Solving, Confronting)**

The Collaborative conflict management style is both assertive and cooperative, and attempts to achieve outcomes that fully satisfy the concerns of all parties involved (Thomas, 2008). This overall theme of collaboration has subgroupings that have been identified in literature. Confronting, Integration, and Problem-solving are all terms that have been used to describe the behaviors and overall workings of the collaborative conflict management style. Confronting is the initial step of addressing the issue head on seeking a win-win outcome. Integration is the process of working with other parties to exchange and share ideas. Lastly, problem solving is the process of creating favorable results as a result of thought collaboration and working with others. Collaborating is the only conflict management style that considers the



interests of both parties and focuses on mutual gains, and it is therefore argued that this style produces superior outcomes with more open exchange of information and a higher level of satisfaction through exploring the conflict issues more comprehensively (Van Slyke, 1999, cited in Goodwin, 2002).

When Collaboration is the goal, parties seek to achieve an I-win, you-win result to conflict. This is the result of parties working together to solve complex problems with each of their needs being considered. Ideas and Collaborating might take the form of exploring a disagreement to learn from each other's insights, resolving some condition that would otherwise have them competing for resources, or confronting and trying to find a creative solution to an interpersonal problem (Thomas, 2008). Vokic and Sontor (2009) point to the importance of sharing ideas to reach a solution acceptable for both parties. This mutual concern for other parties' needs, allows for an open exchange of information that allows for a deeper understanding of the issues at hand.

The collaborative style to conflict management is best used in situations where the issues are more complex. Rahim (2002) states that the collaboration style is needed when one party alone cannot solve the problem, or when a synthesis of ideas is needed to produce better solutions. Collaboration can serve as a middle ground to unite parties when needed resources are possessed by different parties. This style may be deemed inappropriate for situations when the tasks are simple and both parties are not concerned about the outcomes. This style will also fall short if an immediate decision is required, as true collaboration requires time.

### **Accommodating (Smoothing, Obliging)**

The Accommodating style to conflict management is an unassertive and cooperative style that opposes the competing style (Thomas, 2008). When choosing the accommodating style

individuals will oftentimes neglect their own needs in favor of others' needs. Accommodating style is a self-sacrificing style that lends to a I-lose, you-win outcome. When Accommodation is the goal, individuals possess a low concern for self and a high concern for others.

Accommodation might take the form of selfless generosity or charity, obeying another person's order when you would prefer not to, or yielding to another's point of view (Thomas & Kiliamm, 1974). This style of conflict management accepts the ideas of the competition in hopes of avoiding conflict.

This overall theme of accommodation has subgroupings that have been identified in literature. Smoothing and Obliging are common terms that have been presented in scholarly articles to take a deeper dive into accommodation (Sudhakar, 2015). Smoothing/obliging is the specific style and process in which individuals accommodate. This process focuses on similarities over differences in hopes of satisfying the needs of others. This style is associated with an attempt to diminish differences and emphasize commonalities for the purpose of satisfying the needs of the other party (Owan, 2018). Smoothing tries to adapt to the shared ideas on certain ideas to help stimulate forward progress. This progress creates a temporary solution to conflict. This becomes useful in situations where one party is dealing in a less favorable situation.

The accommodation style to conflict management is best used when individuals feel the other party is correct. Rahim (2002) points to accommodating in situations where issues may be more important to the other party, and parties believe they're incorrect. This style can be useful when trying to preserve a relationship is important, and when hoping to exchange for something in the future from the other party. Situations when accommodating may not be suitable are when the issue is very important to one party and they believe that is correct in their thinking.

## **Competing (Dominating, Forcing)**

The Competing style of conflict management is an uncooperative and assertive style set out to satisfy one's needs over another (Thomas, 2008). When competing, an individual pursues his or her own concerns at the other person's expense, using whatever power seems appropriate to win his or her position (Thomas, 2008). This style creates a win-lose situation where individuals in conflict fight and defend their positions to win. This is often referred to as the dominating or forcing style. These subgroupings are used to provide a more in-depth view into competing.

The Dominating style leads to by any means necessary approach to competing (Thomas, 2008). This method calls for intense unaccommodating behavior to get one's ideas and needs achieved. Dominating style is characterized by an uncooperative behavior aiming at pursuing one's own concerns at the expense of others (Wilmot & Hocker, 2001). The Forcing method to competing is very similar, but focuses more on pushing one's opinion on to others. This approach entails pushing one's opinion at the expense of others and maintaining active resistance to the action of the other person (Chandolia & Anastasiou, 2020). Both these competing methods are self-serving and are resistant to any opposition. This approach involves little two-way communication and often results in compliance, not commitment (Song et al., 2006).

The Competing style is best used when the issue is small or unimportant. Rahim (2002) points to competing in situations where the situation is important to one party and the decision by the other party could be costly. This style also becomes useful when a speedy decision is needed and when in a position of power. The Competing style to conflict management may not be suitable to complex issues or those where parties share equal power. May be more difficult to

successfully achieve this style if those in power have competent subordinates who may challenge their ideas.

### **Kirton Adaption-Innovation Theory**

Kirton (2011) discovered that individuals' problem-solving style is arrayed along a continuum from strongly adaptive to strongly innovative. The terms more adaptive or more innovative are more precise than adaptors and innovators for the theory describes a normally distributed continuum range and not just two types (Kirton, 2011). Adaptive individuals prefer to solve problems by using existing, consensually agreed upon structure. More innovative individuals prefer to think tangentially, challenging the existing structure to solve problems with less regard for group consensus. The more adaptive prefer their problems to be associated with more structure. The more innovative prefer a looser guiding structure.

Adaption-Innovation is measured with an assessment, the Kirton Adaptive-Innovative Inventory (KAI; Kirton, 2011). After completing the inventory, individuals receive results which provide them with insights into their preferred cognitive thinking style. One's KAI score is measured by 32 assessment items. The KAI provides a single number located on a continuum, ranging from 32, more adaptive, to 160, more innovative. The mean is at 95 points, forming a normal distribution across the continuum, with respect to the general population. There only needs to be a small difference between scores of two people for a difference to be noticed. Two individuals with scores less than ten points apart are unlikely to be noticed. Scores ten points apart or more will be noticed over time. KAI results with 20 points or more are very clear and noticeable and large enough to require care to avoid breakdowns in communication. Cognitive gaps along the A-I continuum of 30-40 can cause real problems and will require constant attention to avoid misunderstandings and friction (Lindsay, 1985). Kirton (2011) touches on the

importance of using KAI to bring awareness to those in collaboration using this information to manage diversity among individuals with divergent problem-solving styles, ideas, and opinions. This diversity if managed correctly will create the most robust outcome, one not limited in its construction.

### **Problem A and B**

Kirton (2011) states that Problem A is the original or main problem which caused collaboration to be initiated. Problem B is the problem of how best to work together during collaboration, given each individual's diversity brought to the team. Problem B is inherent to complex problems as a diversity of problem-solving styles are necessary to suitably solve complex problems, but dissimilar problem-solving styles (greater than 20 points) interacting in the problem-solving process indubitably will create difficulty in communication, work, and trust (Friedel and Hatala, 2010). Successful groups spend considerably more time and effort on solving Problem A than resolving Problem B. Groups who minimize the effects of Problem B can focus on producing greater outcomes for Problem A; however, good leaders recognize the importance of addressing Problem B when it is an important problem to solve.

In order to successfully address problem a first the diversity of Problem B needs to be correctly managed. Kirton (2011) touches on how mutual respect is needed within collaborative environments to create a safe environment for the sharing and exchanging of ideas. (2011) also touches on the importance of bridgers and willingness of individuals to display coping behaviors. Bridgers are skilled individuals that play a role in group cohesion and thus to the diminution of Problem B, permitting indeed focus on Problem A. They are tasked with identifying characteristics of group members that could be used to bring them closer together for the benefit of the group. Coping behaviors are similar as they create temporary relief based on

individual behaviors away from their preferred problem-solving style. These behaviors create short-term solutions to some of the challenges in Problem B to foster more robust outcomes for Problem A.

### **Cognitive Gap**

The insights of KAI also provide evidence for cognitive gap. Kirton (2011) defines cognitive gap as a difference in style between problem solvers and the problem, or between the problem solvers themselves, which needs to be overcome in order to find solutions either alone or in a team. KAI is measured on a point system. A 10-point KAI difference between two people is the “just noticeable difference” (Kirton, 2011). At 20 points difference, difficulties in mutual understanding and collaboration begin to become apparent. Earlier it was noted that ten KAI Points difference between two people is a noticeable difference. Research also shows that a gap of about 20 points requires effort by the user to ensure close accord (Reference). The need for increasing amounts of coping behaviors will be required to form a smoothly operating team.

### **Coping Behavior**

Coping behaviors are when individuals operate away from their preferred problem-solving style (Kirton, 2011). These temporary behaviors are displayed by individuals in order to decrease the effects of cognitive gap. Kirton (2011) states more adaptive individuals will move away from familiar consensus or agreed structures into a territory with more risk. More innovative individuals will remind themselves master of rules, and operate adaptively, creatively, within consensually agreed restraints. These behaviors come with some cost to the individual displaying them, as significant energy is required to cope outside of one’s preferred style. Using coping behaviors too frequently may cause individuals great stress and discomfort. Individuals

may switch and refuse to continue said behaviors, thus contributing to a breakdown in team or group effectiveness or success.

Friedel (2022) touches on the importance of self-awareness, mutual respect, and the process of learning when concerning coping behaviors. These three steps act as a process for coping effectively. Self-awareness is a needed facet of coping because it acts as the foundation for the process. It is important for individuals to understand when coping is needed and understand how long and how intensely they are comfortable displaying such behaviors. Evidence suggests that we turn on coping behavior like a light switch, choosing to operate more adaptively or more innovatively along the continuum when we recognise the need to do so (Freidel, 2022). Mutual respect is the next major step. Mutual respect is key in helping to recognise the strengths and weaknesses of team members given specific problems. Lastly, Learning serves as a reflective ending in the process. The importance of learning from the failures and successes of collaboration and using that information to gain helpful insights for the future.

## **Chapter 4: Findings and Research Propositions - Conflict Management and KAI Connections**

Academic literature points to connections between KAI, conflict, and conflict management techniques. These connections begin with the understanding of preferred problem-solving style and cognitive gap. The cognitive gap can be confused with and disguised as common interpersonal causes of conflict between individuals. Jablolkow and Booth (2006) bring attention to the challenges cognitive gap can create during collaboration. These effects are similar to those listed in Hotepo et al (2010). Both cited interpersonal effects, such as breakdowns in communication, feelings of mistrust, and inability to perform. Lowering the effects of the gap as well as the common causes of conflict is very important for collaboration. Next, the literature points to coping behaviors or conflict management techniques as the means to effectively manage these effects.

Earlier it was noted by Kirton (2011) that a ten-point difference between two people's KAI score is a noticeable difference, but a gap of about 20 points requires significant effort from both parties. Closing the gap becomes the job of both the more adaptive and more innovative individual, however, it may be the case that only one person is coping. The increasing need for coping behaviors will be needed to maintain a collaborative effort. These coping behaviors described in Kirton (2011) are very similar to the conflict management styles presented in Thomas and Kilmann (1974). Again, coping behaviors are when individuals operate away from their preferred problem-solving style in order to decrease the effects of cognitive gap. This relates to the object of conflict management techniques, which strive to decrease and properly address conflict between individuals. Kirton (2011) describes how more adaptive or more innovative individuals will have to move further away from their styles in order to close the gap.



Similarly, these are shared traits of the compromising and accommodating conflict management styles (Thomas & Kilmann, 1974). Creating temporary fixes to conflict for the betterment of collaboration.

Understanding KAI and the goals of conflict management are important. The major goal of collaboration is to create the best possible outcome to a complex problem. This touches on Kirton's identification of Problem A and Problem B. Members of a team are tasked with creating non-limiting outcomes, but first need to overcome the challenges that are associated with such diversity of ideas. Lastly, the literature highlights similarities again, touching on the important role that collaboration plays in outcomes. Kirton (2011) touches on the need for diversity when problem solving, to not limit ideas and create the most robust solutions. Vokic and Sontor (2009) point out that literature appears to favor the use of collaborative style and suggest that this strategy generates higher quality decisions. These similarities are endless, thus sparking many different topics and ideas for research in the future.

### **Conclusion and Research Propositions**

Jablokow and Booth (2006) teach us the advantages of learning to manage cognitive gaps and the effects associated with conflict. Literature also points to the use of diversity to ignite better solutions, provided collaboration is maintained (Kirton, 2011), by using diversity in ideas and problem-solving styles to produce more robust solutions. We have drawn parallels between the processes of KAI and conflict management styles as a means to create better outcomes.

These connections create a new realm for research in the future. For example:

1. Is there a relationship between preferred problem-solving styles of individuals and how one prefers to exhibit coping behaviors or conflict management style?

2. What specific behaviors may be displayed within a selected conflict management style based on preferred problem-solving style?
3. Are there connections between TKI and KAI concerning conflict management and collaboration?

Research proposition 1 and 2 could take a deeper dive into the subjects of KAI and conflict management styles. These propositions for future research could yield a host of information that could help or further strengthen meaningful collaboration. After these subjects are researched we will be able to discover any links between preferred problem-solving style and the specific conflict management styles individuals prefer to use based on the situation. We will then be able to find the specific behaviors more adaptive and more individuals elect to participate in based on the selected conflict management style. We will be able to find trends into selected coping behaviors and durations for those behaviors based on one's KAI preferred problem solving style. This new information could potentially help organizations and those working closely in a group setting. It will raise awareness of problem-solving styles and preferred ways to solve conflict. Lastly, we will be able to discover any connections between the KAI and TKI models concerning conflict. We can discover if these two models can be used in a process to first identify potential sources of conflict and then provide effective methods to mediate said conflict. These insights could be used in group construction to help lessen the problem associated with resolving Problem B and increase robust outcomes for Problem A.

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