the leadership challenge

Generational Differences in the Workplace:
Leveraging the TKI® Tool to Manage Conflict

tki™

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**THE LEADERSHIP CHALLENGE—
GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES IN THE WORKPLACE**

Leveraging the TKI® Tool to Manage Conflict

Here's one of the biggest challenges for leadership today: the workforce is made up primarily of three very different generations. The Baby Boomers (born 1946–1964), who hold the majority of leadership positions in corporations, tend to bring with them a workaholic attitude, a desire for quality, and a "live-to-work" mentality. Generation Xers (born 1965–1980) are known for their self-reliance, desire for freedom, and "work-to-live" approach to employment. Gen Yers (born 1981–2000) often bring an entrepreneurial, goal-oriented mind-set with a desire for instant feedback. As with differences of any kind, in any relationship or situation, conflict is inevitable.

Generation (birth dates)	Life Events	Career Style
Baby Boomers (1946–1964)	Civil rights movement Woodstock JFK assassination Vietnam war Landing on the moon	Work efficiently Desire quality Optimism / loyalty Cause driven Formal / chain of command
Gen X (1965–1980)	Two working parents Recession / downsizing Watergate MTV, personal computers The *Challenger* disaster	Self-reliance Independence Skepticism Informality / campus culture Work–life balance
Gen Y (aka Millennials) (1981–2000)	Terrorist attacks (e.g., 9/11) Financial instability Technology—instant messaging, wireless, Internet, YouTube Oklahoma City bombing Campus violence	Entrepreneurial confidence Goal oriented Immediate feedback Multitasking / tech savvy Collaborative teamwork

Get to Know the Millennials—Generation Y

While managing conflict is not new to the workplace, it's worthwhile spending some time to understand the uniqueness of Gen Y. In 2015, Generation Y surpassed Gen X and the Baby Boomers as the largest share of the American workforce, according to Pew Research and U.S. Census data. With 53.5 million at work, Gen Y will no doubt make up for some of the Gen X shortfall in replacing Baby Boomers in leadership positions as they retire in the years to come.

What may be more concerning to employers is that Gen Yers, in general, express little loyalty to their current employer, and according to the Deloitte 2016 Millennial Survey, many are planning a near-term exit. The research says that during the next year, if given the choice, one in four Gen Yers would quit his or her current job to join a new organization or to do something different. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that the average worker stays in his or her position for only 4.4 years, yet the expected tenure for Gen Yers is about half that. According to SHRM (*Workplace Visions*, 2014), younger workers also want more control in managing their time in the office.

Millennials know that some things are worth standing for on principle. *Forbes* (January 2014) reported that 85% of Millennials want to work for a socially responsible or ethical company. Even more, 95%, say the company's reputation matters, and 91% say they consider a company's social or community impact when evaluating whether or not to work there. The Pew Research Center found that Millennials were more concerned with helping people in need than they were with getting a high salary.

Millennials who enjoy their job say things like, "They give me time off during the week to teach students in school about business and life skills as a volunteer" or "I work remotely and set my own schedule—I love the flexibility my company provides." They are the most technologically savvy generation we have ever seen. They are able to respond to clients from a tablet, smartphone, or laptop from any location, any time of the day or night.

The request for work–life balance and flexible hours—along with an expectation for quick advancement, development opportunities, the latest technology, and instant feedback—is bound to raise concerns about conflict, engagement, and retention, especially in more traditional, chain-of-command, hierarchical organizations.

Contrast Millennials' work style with that of the Baby Boomers still holding the majority of corporate leadership

positions and you can see there may be some conflict ahead. It's not that Baby Boomers don't have values, ethics, or a desire to improve the community—they do. It's just that work comes first. Money and title are important. Work–life balance? Forget about it. In a BBC interview, Bill Gates once admitted that in the early days he knew every employee's license plate number so he could look out into the parking lot and know when they were coming in and leaving for the day.

MYTH:
Millennials, unlike their older colleagues, can't make a decision without first inviting everyone to weigh in.

FACT:
Millennials are no more likely than many of their older colleagues to solicit advice at work. Both Millennial and Gen X workers have a desire to tap a variety of sources to inform their decisions—much more so than independent-minded Baby Boomers. [Relates to Compromising]

Fortune.com

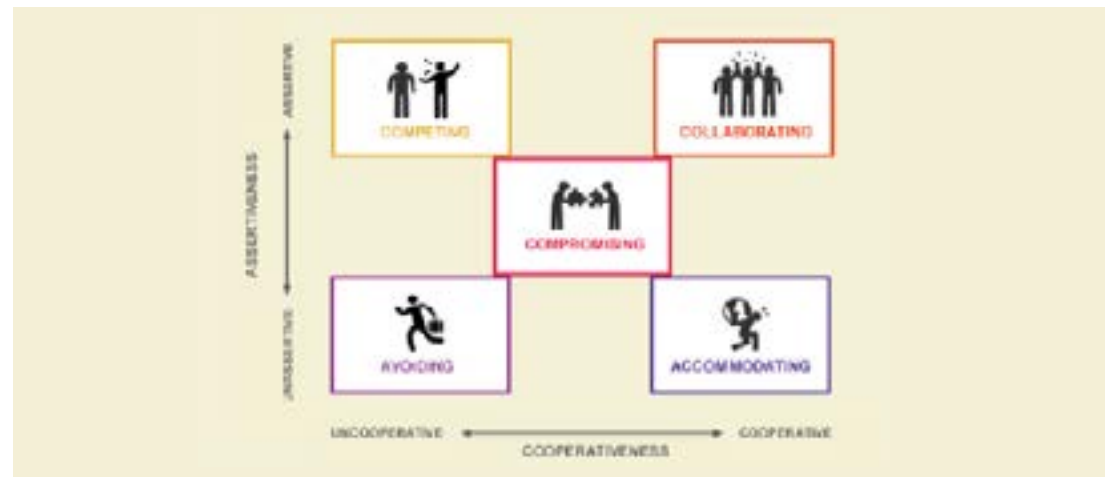# Beginning to Address the Challenge with the TKI® Tool

Where would you even start to address this challenge? Perhaps one of the first steps is creating self-awareness about our differences. At its core, conflict is the result of two things: interdependence and differences. We experience conflict when we must rely on each other at work though we have differences in our values, styles, personality, views about the ideal work environment, or other external things such as the information we receive, our goals, or our responsibilities. *The Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument* (TKI®) was first published in 1974 and has become the world's most widely used conflict assessment tool. It helps people understand their own unique manner of handling conflict and how they can choose the appropriate style for any situation to have a positive impact on others.

The TKI tool measures two independent forces at work when a conflict occurs: the degree to which we act out of assertiveness (trying to satisfy our own concern) and cooperativeness (trying to satisfy the other person's concern). Our scores on these two dimensions combine to form five unique conflict-handling modes, or styles.

TKI® Conflict-Handling Mode Chart

79% of surveyed customers consider the TKI tool's conflict management applications to be the most valuable to their organization.

TechValidate

The Five Conflict-Handling Styles:

Competing—trying to satisfy your own concerns at another person's expense

Collaborating—trying to find a solution that completely satisfies both parties

Compromising—trying to find an acceptable solution that partially satisfies both parties

Avoiding—sidestepping the conflict without trying to satisfy anyone's concerns

Accommodating—trying to satisfy the other person's concerns at the expense of your own

Four Tips for Managing Conflict
Here's a short video explaining what conflict is and where it comes from, with five tips for better conflict management through the TKI assessment.

COMING OF AGE

Coming of Age Means More Competing in Conflict Situations

While Competing tends to be the least commonly used TKI conflict-handling mode compared to the other modes, CPP's research in a sample of 671,983 users from 2000 to 2015 found that the Millennials and Gen Yers clearly use the Competing mode more than any other generational group. But we can't be sure whether this is a generational difference—perhaps it's just a function of coming of age. Is today's situation any different from what it's always been? Socrates said, "Our youth now love luxury. They have bad manners, contempt for authority; they show disrespect for their elders…they no longer rise when elders enter the room; they contradict their parents…gobble up their food and tyrannize their teachers." Gen Yers are clearly more concerned with satisfying their own needs in conflict situations when compared to other generations.

Average TKI® Scores by Generation
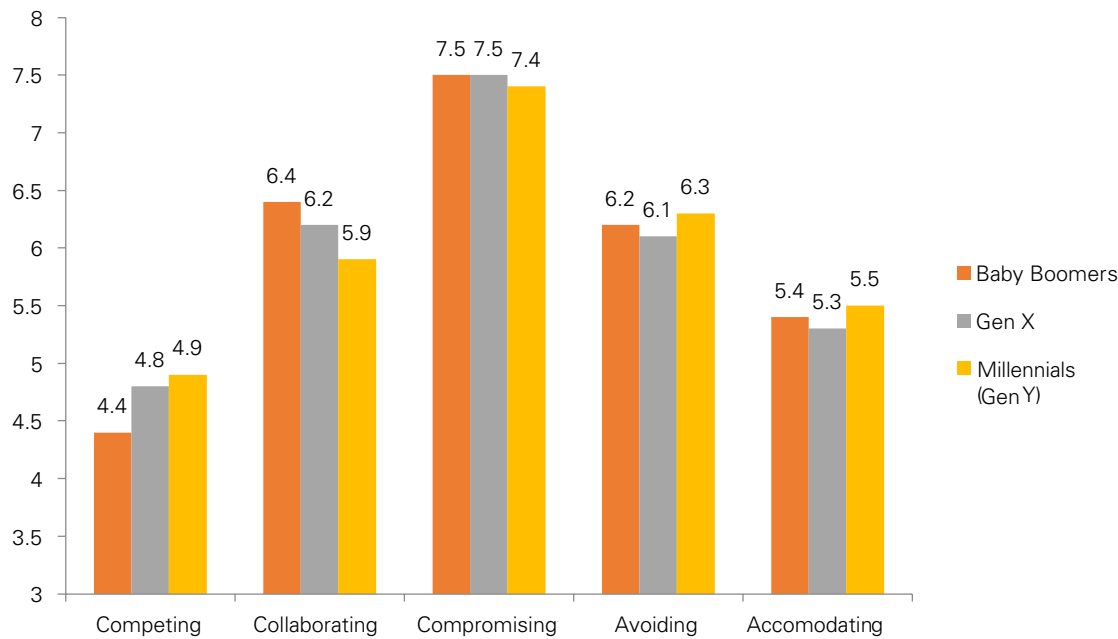
CPP has found that personality clashes and warring egos may account for up to 49% of conflict at work. Knowing that members of Generation Y have high ideals and are inclined to operate in Competing mode, we must prepare ourselves to handle the inevitable workplace differences and coach Gen Yers to understand their own reaction to conflict. At their age and experience level, they've also had less opportunity to practice the skills necessary for successful resolution of conflict. For all generations, successful conflict resolution means learning to effectively flex one's style to fit the situation and getting some practice in navigating an effective two-way dialogue.

Additionally, according to *The Economist*, 41% of Millennials agreed that "employees should do what their manager

tells them, even when they can't see the reason for it," compared with 30% of Baby Boomers and 30% of members of Generation X (born between the mid-1960s and 1980). When we look at the TKI tool, this relates directly to the Accommodating mode. The chart at left shows that Gen Y uses the Accommodating mode more than the other generations.

MYTH:

Millennials are the most self-involved generation.

FACT:

Millennials tend to set loftier social goals than prior generations. Each year, a survey conducted by the University of Michigan asks high school seniors to rate their life's ambitions. Data compiled by Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, a psychology professor at Clark University, shows that Millennials rated "contribute to society," "correct inequalities," and "be a leader in the community" higher than Baby Boomers did when they were younger. [Shows that they want to maintain peace and resolve conflict]

WashingtonPost.com

Flexing Your Conflict Style—Swim or Stand

The TKI tool empowers you to know your preferred conflict-handling style, understand the four other styles, learn to use all of them, and choose the most appropriate style for responding to any situation. Flexibility in your work environment and your conflict styles may be one of the keys to keeping Millennials engaged in your workplace. As Thomas Jefferson said, "In matters of style, swim with the current; in matters of principle, stand like a rock."

The **Competing** style is most effectively used in situations where it's important to take a stand, "like a rock," to protect your own interests. It's standing up for your rights, defending a position you believe is correct, or simply trying to win. This style is best used when quick, decisive action on an important issue is vital. For example, this may mean not wavering on enforcing an ethical rule or company policy with consistent application, even when there is a strong current pushing against you.

The **Collaborating** style is most effective when you must find a solution that all parties are truly committed to implementing and supporting. It's like swimming with the entire school of fish, moving forward, together, in unison. When fish swim together in a school, they become less vulnerable to predators, they have more foraging opportunities, and they save energy associated with propelling themselves through the water. It may take more time to reach consensus and get moving in a common direction. Once consensus is achieved and the group is swimming, you can actually move faster, with less individual effort, and overcome unforeseen obstacles as a team. The Collaborating style can mobilize groups for driving important long-term initiatives, such as a culture change or new product implementation.

We'd recommend the TKI tool because it is easy to use—people attending see how it applies on the job almost immediately.

Ana Hanna, Director, Talent Management and Organizational Development, Buckeye Pipe Line Company, L.P.

The **Compromising** style allows everyone to give a little and gain a little to reach a settlement that everyone can live with. No one gets exactly what they wanted, but you strike a bargain and are able to move on more quickly than continuing to try to compete or collaborate. Perhaps you've traveled to an oceanside resort to swim and find that the beach is closed but the pool is open, so you can still swim and enjoy the view. Compromising is best used when the issue is moderately important but not worth the energy or disruption of the more assertive styles.

The **Avoiding** style is best used when the situation is trivial or unimportant. It can also be used temporarily when people need time to cool off or think things through before switching to another style to move things forward. You may also decide to avoid appropriately when the costs associated with getting into the discussion outweigh the benefits. It's like swimming in the ocean with no sight of shore. When it makes the best sense just stop swimming and save your energy until you find a map or compass and know you can swim in the right direction.

The **Accommodating** style can serve an important role in preserving relationships in an organization. It's like doing the backstroke and giving up your own position or concerns to allow someone else to move forward. This compassion and generosity can really help when people are under stress

and it's important to show empathy and maintain positive relationships. Retail organizations that have a "no-hassle" refund policy practice this with emotional customers on a daily basis, issuing refunds and building goodwill with customers regardless of the situation.

Knowing your most preferred natural style is the first step in self-discovery when it comes to conflict management. Then once you understand which conflict-handling styles are the most comfortable for you, you can learn the other styles and practice flexing your style to fit the situation.

> *The TKI tool increases self-awareness for participants, who are then able to adapt their conflict-handling style more effectively depending on the situation.*
>
> **Organizational Development Consultant, Large Enterprise Health Care Company**

We tend to be more of a conflict-avoidant culture, so increasing awareness around the benefits of healthy conflict and the negative impacts of always being conflict avoidant using the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument *has been helpful.*

Organizational Development Consultant, Large Enterprise Financial Services Company

Healthy Dialogue in Conflict

Resolving conflict through dialogue can be uncomfortable for anyone, but it is manageable with awareness and practice. So how do you begin to start a healthy conversation during conflict and coach Gen Yers to do the same? When in doubt about how best to resolve conflict with employees, co-workers, etc., regardless of their generation, the best approach is to build trust first. There's no substitute for clear and direct communication, as well as healthy dialogue across generations or any other differentiating factor.

MYTH:
Millennials have a whole new value system.

FACT:
All generations, including Millennials, overwhelmingly value relationships with friends and family above anything else.

SHRM.org

For starters, think about your preferred TKI style and ask yourself whether it's the best approach for the situation. Think through the following:

+ Which TKI style is the most appropriate for the situation?
+ How should I flex or shift my most preferred style in this situation?
+ How important is the issue to me? Why?
+ How much time do I have to reach a conclusion?
+ How much support do I need from others to ensure long-term success on this issue?
+ What are the consequences of not getting my needs met in this situation?
+ Do I truly understand why the issue is important to the other person, and what he or she would like to see happen?
+ What are the facts—the specific information I have seen or heard regarding the situation?
+ What are my goals?
+ What are their goals?
+ How do they differ?
+ Where can we find common ground?

I'd recommend the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument *because it's simple, intuitive and provides instant and often insightful feedback into conflict styles as well as the impact of one's own conflict style on others.*

Patrick Dailey, HR Consultant, Celanese Corporation

We use the TKI tool mostly within teams. The increased self-awareness and knowledge that all styles have their own given different situations is valuable.

We do not strive to decrease conflict, we strive to manage it more effectively. The Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument *helps this.*

**Organizational Development Consultant,
Global 500 Computer Software Company**

Then remember that in conflict, while it may be difficult in emotional or stressful situations, it's important to maintain a two-way conversation. As in any good dialogue, using open-ended questions and practicing active listening will help shed light on differences and allow you to discover common interests. At the beginning of the meeting, take some time to set the stage and explain the purpose of the conversation. Then, ask some questions like, "Why is this issue important to you?" or "What would you actually like to see happen?" Actively listen and explain your position. Guide the conversation toward agreement, even if in the end this means explaining your plan to move forward to satisfy your own needs or "stand like a rock" on the issue. Discuss your plan for coaching and follow-up as you end the conversation.

CONCLUSION

Navigating Conflict in Today's Changing Workplace

Our particular generation affects the way we view work, approach conflict, and make decisions, and it impacts our communication with others. The best way to resolve conflict with employees of any generation is to get to know them personally, build relationships with them, and have a healthy two-way conversation. Despite our differences, there are some common things that members of every generation want: to work with positive people, to build great relationships, to grow and learn new skills, to work in a friendly environment, to get a nice paycheck, and to make a difference.

The Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument *is relatively easy to administer and explain to participants in our leadership development program, and we'd recommend it to other organizations. The team conflict information is helpful for them to see ways to develop teams of diversity to solve problems more effectively.*

Organizational Development Consultant, Large Enterprise Construction Company

About the Author

Saundra Stroope

Saundra Stroope is an HR and talent management leader with over 20 years of experience in talent, employee engagement, leadership, team, and organizational development, creating solutions that align with business strategy and achieve results at global and Fortune 500 companies. For the past 10 years, she has focused on coaching leaders through times of rapid growth and culture change. She has authored more than a dozen works, including a section on engaging and retaining high-potential leaders in Integrated Talent Management Scorecards.

Resources:

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