



Intercultural Conflict Styles

...for AFS
& Friends

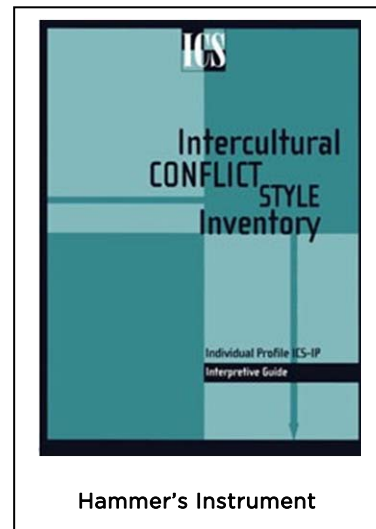
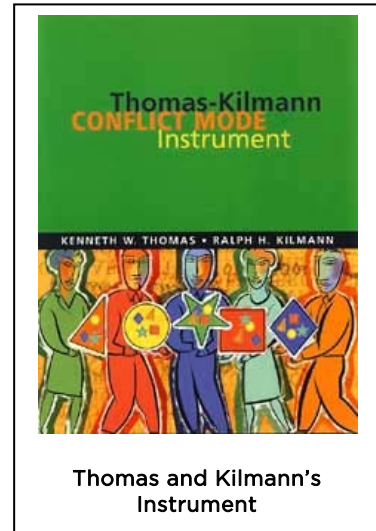
Communicating with people of different cultural backgrounds may seem natural for those who are involved in AFS as participants, families, volunteers, and staff, or other roles. However, in direct relation to such intercultural contact, it is also natural for these people to encounter miscommunications based on cultural differences. Miscommunications and misunderstandings with people within our same cultures can feel overwhelming enough, and when these occur with people of another culture, sub-culture or co-culture, we may feel more stress or even a sense of serious conflict.

A number of theorists have attempted to describe what kinds of behaviors emerge from individuals and groups when they are involved in a conflict. Many agree that no matter how mature or intelligent we are, or how well our interpersonal and intercultural communication skills are developed, a stressful situation can cause us to deal with conflict in distinct ways. In a stressful situation, frequently all of the good intentions and patience we are able to apply successfully during lower-stress encounters and interactions can be forgotten, and sometimes we may find that our behavior can surprise even ourselves. Because of this, conflict theorists and intercultural conflict experts have developed conflict style inventories which help us to understand our personal tendencies toward dealing with conflict, the tendencies others may have, and how understanding those styles is linked to an increased understanding of cultural differences.

Kenneth Thomas and Ralph Kilmann are two individuals who have done considerable research on conflict styles. They are interested in what can happen when two or more people from either the same or different cultures come together and find that they have different desires and/or expectations.

Mitch Hammer is another researcher interested in conflict styles. He has founded of several organizations that focus on intercultural competence development and conflict resolution and has developed a theoretical model and assessment tool that is used by mediators, trainers, and counselors to solve problems and resolve disagreements and conflict across cultures.

And, expert Stella Ting-Toomey offers us insight on issues related to cross-cultural facework, conflict communication styles, and conflict competence.



THOMAS & KILMANN CONFLICT MODE INSTRUMENT (TKI)

The Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI) looks at how an individual's behavior is impacted when the concerns of at least two people seem to be incompatible. A person's behavior

is described along two dimensions, or axes: **Assertiveness** and **Cooperativeness**. Assertiveness refers to the extent to which the individual tries to satisfy his or her own wishes, and Cooperativeness refers to the extent to which the individual shows concern for the wishes of the other party involved.

Depending on how high or low each individual's style is on the Assertiveness and the Cooperativeness scale, one's conflict style is defined, according to the TKI, as one of the following five (5) modes.

Competing

- High Assertiveness
- Low Cooperativeness

Accommodating

- Low Assertiveness
- High Cooperativeness

Avoiding

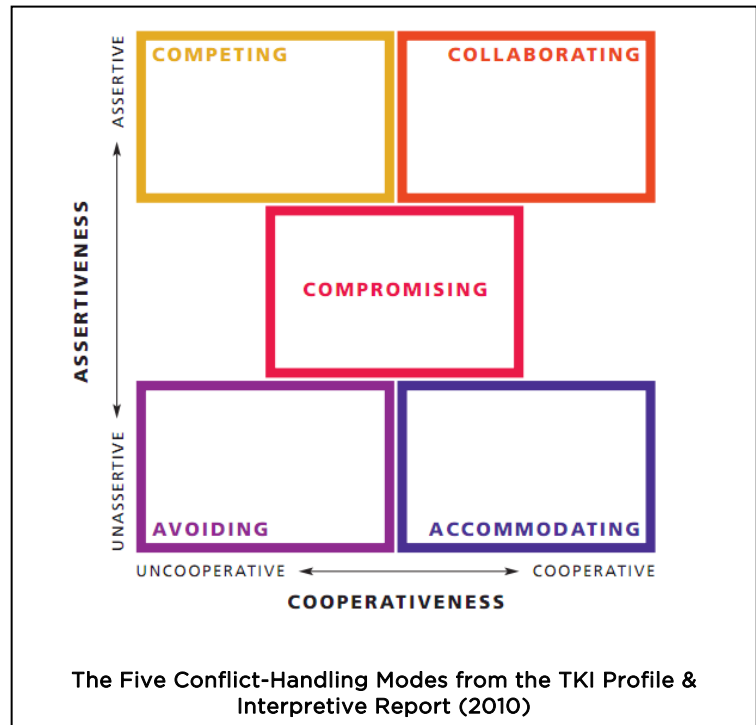
- Low Assertiveness
- Low Cooperativeness

Collaborating

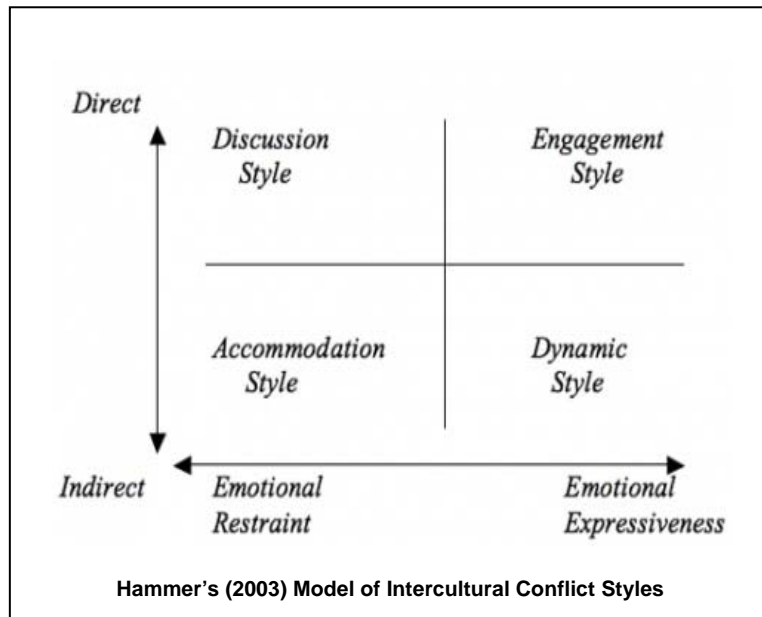
- High Assertiveness
- High Cooperativeness

Compromising

- Moderate Assertiveness
- Moderate Cooperativeness



INTERCULTURAL CONFLICT STYLE INVENTORY (ICS)



The Intercultural Conflict Style Inventory (ICS) developed by Mitch Hammer can be used for a number of purposes and can contribute to our efforts at AFS as they relate to resolving disagreements among people from different cultural backgrounds who approach conflict in distinct ways. The tool can also be helpful in relation to managing stress and anxiety around intercultural conflicts, communicating appropriately and improving relationships with people from different cultures than your own, and assisting in the mediation of conflicts between others. The inventory offers insight into both one's own conflict approach as well as those generally preferred by people of specific cultures.

The Intercultural Conflict Style model (ICS) measures people's approaches to conflict along two different continuums; **Direct/Indirect** (D/I), which assesses one's preference for taking a direct or an indirect approach in responding to conflict, and **Emotionally Expressive/Restrained** (E/R), which assesses the extent to which one prefers dealing with conflicts by expressing or by restraining emotion.

Different individuals, but also people of different cultures, approach conflicts in distinct ways. While not intended to be comprehensive, the ICS points to some regional cultural differences with regard to emotional expression and directness of approach to conflict resolution. For example, North American (US, Canada) cultural patterns are predominately within the Discussion Style, European patterns are often located in the Discussion and/or the Engagement style, and Central and Latin American patterns to conflict can be found in the Accommodation and Engagement style.

Asian cultural patterns primarily fall under Accommodation (e.g., Japan, Cambodia). The Arab Middle East cultural patterns resolve conflicts within the Dynamic style and Israeli patterns can represent the Engagement style. African cultural patterns can be characteristic of any of the four styles. This information does not intend to stereotype cultures, but rather stimulate thinking and discussion around cultural systems in general.

PERSPECTIVES ON MANAGING INTERCULTURAL CONFLICTS

Stella Ting-Toomey, Professor of Human Communication Studies at California State University, Fullerton, USA, has introduced to the intercultural field the theory of face negotiation. As a professor, she focuses especially on intercultural communication theory, intercultural communication training and design, and intercultural and interpersonal conflict management. As a researcher, two theories she has introduced and refined are the conflict face-negotiation theory and the cultural/ethnic identity negotiation theory.

CONFLICT FACE-NEGOTIATION

You may be familiar with the expression, "saving face". The word, face, as it is used in this context, refers to the self-image a person wishes to maintain while interacting with others or in an international environment. A person or a group may experience a loss of face when they feel they have been treated in a way that negatively impacts their identity. If loss of face occurs repeatedly, a conflict may arise. Stella Ting-Toomey and colleague Atsuko Kurogi developed the Conflict Face-Negotiation Theory to understand intercultural conflict approaches. Because many previously developed frameworks of understanding conflict have taken a Western approach, Ting-Toomey and Kurogi have made room for a collectivistic Asian perspective in the face negotiation theory.

The Conflict Face-Negotiation Theory is based on a number of assumptions about the extent to which face is negotiated within a culture and what existing value patterns shape culture members' preferences for the process of negotiating face in conflict situations. The Conflict Face-Negotiation Process is influenced not only by the individual and the cultural socialization of two people involved in a conflict, but also the factors related to relation and the situation of the people experiencing conflict.

CONSTRUCTIVE CONFLICT SKILLS

Ting-Toomey describes constructive conflict skills as those skills that make it possible for us to manage conflict situations appropriately, effectively and adaptively and proposes four skills that are particularly helpful in relation to AFS work.

Mindful Listening: A face-validating skill that requires that special attention be paid to the cultural and personal assumptions being expressed in a conflict interaction. Ways to engage in mindful listening include verbal and non-verbal paraphrasing of the content meaning and emotional meaning of the other party's message to check for accurate interpretations.

Mindful Reframing: A creative, mutual face-honoring skill that requires the creation of alternative contexts to shape our understanding of the conflict behavior.

Collaborative Dialogue: An exchange of dialogue that is oriented fully in the present moment and builds on Mindful Listening and Mindful Reframing to practice communicating with different linguistic or contextual resources.

Culture-Based Conflict Resolution Steps: A seven-step conflict resolution model that guides cultural teams to identify the background of a problem, analyze the cultural assumptions and underlying values of a person in a conflict situation, and promotes ways to achieve harmony and share a common goal.



Practicing *mindful listening* is just one of the things one can do to reduce intercultural conflicts.

CONCLUSION

Thomas & Kilmann, Hammer, and Ting-Toomey are only a few of the many researchers who have explored the complexities of Intercultural conflict. It is also a topic of interest for sociologists, psychologists, business managers, anthropologists and linguists.

Acquiring knowledge about personal and intercultural conflict styles can help us maintain a general awareness and mindfulness when interacting with people from other cultures. Whether we consider ourselves Accommodators or Avoiders, use Dynamic or Discussion styles, or identify with any of the typically Eastern or Western approaches to conflict, we can practice mindful listening and reframing in our attempts to transform conflicts into meaningful dialogue.

Intercultural Conflict Styles...

- ✓ vary depending on the individual and are often influenced by culture.
- ✓ vary in terms of level directness and expressed emotion.
- ✓ often arise when an individual feels that his or her identity/image, or face, has been compromised.
- ✓ Constructive Conflict Styles involve the development of skills to improve our ability to work with conflict across cultures.

For more information:

Thomas & Kilmann (1974). *Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument*.

Hammer (2005). *The Intercultural Conflict Style Inventory*.

Ting-Toomey (2004). *Translating conflict face-negotiation theory into practice*.