

CONFLICT AND NEGOTIATION

Conflict Theory and Styles

Thomas-Kilmann · Follett · Deutsch · Rahim

PAPER 01 / 02

A Furtherance reference compendium on the intellectual traditions behind organisational design, leadership, execution, and culture.

IN THIS PAPER

This paper opens the Conflict and Negotiation series in Furtherance's reference library. It covers how conflict is understood and handled – the styles people use and the conditions that make conflict constructive or destructive. The question it answers: is conflict a problem to suppress, or a resource to manage?

Thomas and Kilmann give the working vocabulary of conflict styles. Follett, decades ahead of her time, shows conflict can be integrative. Deutsch identifies the structural driver of whether it turns constructive or destructive. Rahim turns the whole thing into a measurable, manageable discipline.

Thomas & Kilmann *Conflict Mode Instrument, 1974*

Conflict management · the five modes

CORE THESIS

Conflict behaviour varies along two dimensions – **assertiveness** (concern for your own goals) and **cooperativeness** (concern for the other's) – producing five modes. No mode is best in all situations; skill lies in choosing the right one.

FRAMEWORK

Mode	Assertive?	Cooperative?	Fits when...
Competing	High	Low	Speed or principle demands a stand
Accommodating	Low	High	The issue matters more to them
Avoiding	Low	Low	The issue is trivial or timing is wrong
Collaborating	High	High	Both sets of concerns are too important to trade
Compromising	Mid	Mid	A fair, quick middle ground will do

METHODOLOGY

A self-report instrument (the TKI), among the most widely used in management development.

SIGNIFICANCE AND CRITIQUE

The dominant practical framework for talking about conflict handling. The critique: it measures self-reported *preference*, not skill, and people flex more by situation than a fixed “style” implies.

Mary Parker Follett 1868–1933

Management thought · constructive conflict and integration

CORE THESIS

Conflict is simply the appearance of **difference** – neither good nor bad – and can be made constructive. Of the three ways to handle it, **integration** (a solution meeting both parties' real desires) is superior to domination or compromise. Follett championed “power *with*” rather than “power *over*”.

FRAMEWORK

Way of handling conflict	Result
Domination	One side wins; the other's need is unmet
Compromise	Both give something up; neither is satisfied
Integration	A new solution meets both sides' real desires

Her insight that stated **positions** hide underlying **desires** anticipated modern interest-based negotiation by half a century.

METHODOLOGY

Philosophical and management thought, drawn from close observation of organisations and civic life.

SIGNIFICANCE AND CRITIQUE

Remarkably prescient – integration prefigures Fisher and Ury's interests-over-positions. The critique: her work is conceptual and of its era, and was long overlooked.

Morton Deutsch 1920–2017

Social psychology · cooperation, competition and conflict

CORE THESIS

Whether conflict becomes **constructive or destructive** depends on how the situation is structured. His “crude law of social relations”: **cooperative** processes breed constructive conflict and mutual gain, while **competitive** ones breed destructive, win-lose spirals.

FRAMEWORK

Structure	Conflict tends to be...
Cooperative (shared goals)	Constructive – problem-solving, trust, integrative
Competitive (opposed goals)	Destructive – coercion, suspicion, distributive

METHODOLOGY

Social-psychological experiment and theory; Deutsch effectively founded the field of conflict resolution.

SIGNIFICANCE AND CRITIQUE

The theoretical foundation of conflict resolution, and the reason we structure disputes cooperatively. The critique: the “crude law” is broad, and real settings mix cooperative and competitive elements.

M. Afzalur Rahim Managing Organizational Conflict, 1983–

Organisational behaviour · measured conflict management

CORE THESIS

Conflict should be **managed**, not eliminated: an **optimal** level of the right *kind* of conflict aids performance. Rahim refined the dual-concern model into a validated instrument and a diagnostic approach across individual, group and intergroup levels.

FRAMEWORK

Style (dual-concern)	Concern for self / others
Integrating	High / High – problem-solving
Obliging	Low / High – yielding
Dominating	High / Low – forcing
Avoiding	Low / Low – withdrawing
Compromising	Mid / Mid – splitting the difference

Rahim also distinguishes **task** from **relationship** conflict – a moderate amount of the former can help, while the latter almost always harms.

METHODOLOGY

Empirical, instrument-based research (the ROCI-II measure) across organisational levels.

SIGNIFICANCE AND CRITIQUE

Brought measurement rigour and the “optimal conflict” idea to the field. The critique: the style taxonomy overlaps heavily with Thomas-Kilmann's.

Synthesis

Contribution	Focus	Key idea	Register
Thomas-Kilmann	Handling styles	Five conflict modes	Instrument / practical
Follett	Reframing conflict	Integration; power-with	Foundational thought
Deutsch	Structural driver	Cooperative vs competitive	Social-psych theory
Rahim	Measured management	Optimal conflict; ROCI-II	Empirical

FOR THE OPERATOR

Conflict thinking gives the operator a shared vocabulary of styles (Thomas-Kilmann), the pivotal insight that conflict can be integrative rather than merely distributive (Follett), the structural lever that turns it constructive or destructive (Deutsch), and a measurable, manageable discipline (Rahim). The instruction is clear: do not suppress conflict – structure it cooperatively and push for integrative solutions that meet both sides' real interests. That craft, at the table, is negotiation – the next paper.