

# Conflict styles, gender and leadership

Nikhita Blackburn

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## Key digested message

Men and those at higher organisational levels are likely to use assertive modes of dealing with conflict. Women and those at lower organisational levels are more likely to use cooperative conflict styles. This difference may help understand differences in style and perceptions of men and women as leaders and the gender pay gap.

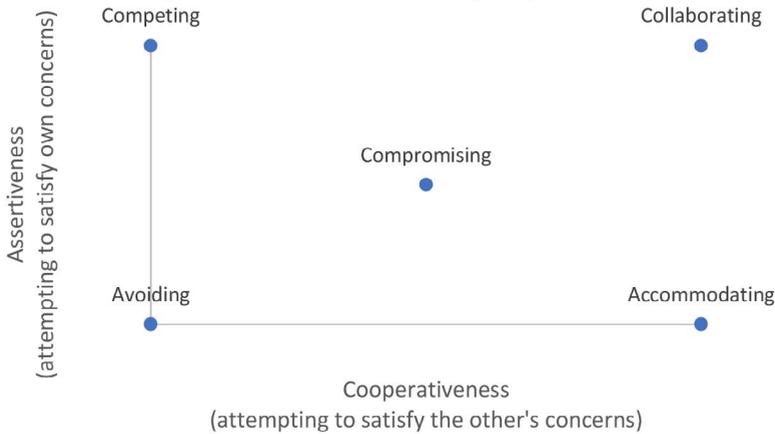
## Gender and conflict style

**T**HE NUMBER of women leaders is increasing but women are still under-represented at higher levels (Appelbaum et al., 2003), and a gender pay gap exists (ADP, 2019). Differences in conflict style may help explain different approaches to conflict and negotiating in men and women and across organisational levels.

Conflict is defined as a situation in which people's opinions appear incompatible. This study adopts the conflict model used by Thomas (Thomas & Kilman, 2002), shown in Figure 1. There are five conflict styles according to the extent of cooperativeness and assertiveness: Competing, Collaborating, Compromising, Accommodating and Avoiding. The theory suggests people respond habitually to conflict, often using one or two modes automatically. Practitioners often look at conflict style to develop teams and leaders, increasing awareness of and conscious choice in using each conflict mode.

Previous research shows males report higher levels of Competing than women, whilst females report more Compromising, Avoiding or Accommodating (Holt & DeVore, 2005). Research also suggests there is greater Competing and, to a lesser extent, Collaborating at higher organisational levels (Brewer et al., 2002).

Figure 1: The five conflict styles (Thomas & Kilman, 2002)



## Research objectives

This study aimed to examine differences in conflict handling style between men and women and between different levels of an organisation. It was intended to build on the research by Thomas, Fann Thomas & Schaubhut (2008), but with a much larger sample and spanning a longer period, in order to check whether similar results were found over 10 years later.

## Methodology

Data was analysed from an archive of 462,883 people who completed the Thomas-Kilman Conflict modes Instrument (TKI) online between 2004 and 2019. 54 per cent were male, 46 per cent female. Respondents were from a range of different occupations and had indicated their gender and organisational level.

ANOVA analyses were conducted to look for differences in scores for the five conflict modes by organisational level and gender.

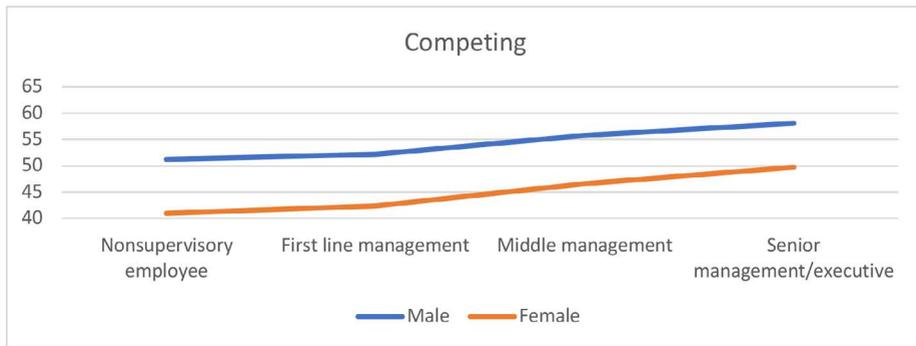
## Results

Results showed significant main effects and interaction effects for all five conflict modes. In summary, men score higher than women on Competing and Collaborating whilst women score higher on Compromising, Avoiding and Accommodating.

People at higher organisational levels scored significantly higher on Competing, Collaborating and Compromising and lower on Avoiding and Accommodating. The ANOVA results are shown below.

### Competing

As shown in the graph below, men had significantly higher competing scores than women ( $F(1,462695)=10130.91, p<0.001, \text{partial } \eta^2=0.021$ ) and this was the mode with the largest gender difference. People at higher organisational levels also had higher competing scores than those at lower levels ( $F(3,462695)=1472.19, p<0.001, \text{partial } \eta^2=0.009$ ). There was also a significant but negligible interaction between gender and organisational level ( $F(3,462695)=18.55, p<0.001, \text{partial } \eta^2=0.00$ ).



### *Collaborating*

On average, men had higher Collaborating scores than women ( $F(1,462695)=149.60$ ,  $P<0.001$ , partial  $\eta^2=0.00$ ). People at higher organisational levels had higher Collaborating scores than people at lower levels ( $F(3,462695)=1943.47$ ,  $p<0.001$ , partial  $\eta^2=0.012$ ). There was also a significant but negligible interaction effect ( $F(3,462695)=44.82$ ,  $p<0.001$ , partial  $\eta^2=0.00$ ).

### *Compromising*

On average, women scored higher on Compromising than men ( $F(1, 462691)=897.76$ ,  $p<0.001$ , partial  $\eta^2=0.002$ ). People at higher levels in an organisation had significantly higher scores on compromising, but this pattern tailed off at senior leadership positions ( $F(5,462691)=278.03$ ,  $p<0.001$ , partial  $\eta^2=0.003$ ). There was also a significant but negligible interaction effect ( $F(5,462691)=29.38$ ,  $P<0.001$ , partial  $\eta^2=0.00$ ).

### *Avoiding*

Women scored higher on Avoiding than men ( $F(1, 462691)=780.94$ ,  $p<0.001$ , partial  $\eta^2=0.002$ ). People at higher organisational levels scored lower on Avoiding than at lower organisational levels ( $F(5,462691)= 2346.55$ ,  $p<0.001$ , partial  $\eta^2=0.025$ ) and this was the mode with the largest difference between different organisational levels. There was also a significant but negligible interaction effect ( $F(5,462691)=31.20$ ,  $P<0.001$ , partial  $\eta^2=0.00$ ).

### *Accommodating*

Women scored higher than men on Accommodating ( $F(1, 462691)=1254.70$ ,  $p<0.001$ , partial  $\eta^2=0.003$ ). People at higher organisational levels scored lower on Accommodating than those at lower levels ( $F(5,462691)= 897.20$ ,  $p<0.001$ , partial  $\eta^2=0.010$ ). There was also a significant but negligible interaction effect ( $F(5,462691)=28.60$ ,  $P<0.001$ , partial  $\eta^2=0.00$ ).

### **Discussion**

Results showed differences in conflict style between genders and organisational levels, with level showing the greater effect. Interaction effects were statically significant but negligible. Findings are in line with previous research.

The largest difference between organisational levels was seen for Avoiding, with Avoiding scores decreasing as organisational level increased. Accomodating scores also

decreased, whilst Competing and Collaborating increased. Compromising showed a curvilinear relationship with organisational level, being lower at employee and senior levels. This suggests that people at higher organisational levels are likely to be more assertive and less cooperative.

The largest difference between men and women was for Competing, with men scoring higher. Men also scored higher on Collaborating, whilst women scored higher on Accommodating, Avoiding and slightly higher on Compromising. These differences were generally found across all organisational levels, including the highest, and may contribute to different perceptions and leadership styles of men and women. Differences in conflict style are also likely to affect how men and women negotiate their salaries. Awareness of different conflict styles may help individuals adapt their style when discussing salary. It may also be worth educating those making decisions about salary, so they recognise the effect of conflict styles and reduce unintentional bias towards those with a more assertive style.

Findings have implications for leaders and occupational psychologists. For example, practitioners can raise awareness of the fact that a more cooperative style may be less common at higher levels but could still be valuable. Therefore, individuals might choose to use different ways of dealing with conflict in different situations.

### **The author**

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### **Conflict of interest**

At the time of writing, I was an employee of The Myers-Briggs Company, which owns the TKI.