



Accommodating Leadership and Competitive Leadership

The difference here is between finding a way to please everyone else, or needing to win every battle (and seeing every interaction as a battle to win!).

Leaders face conflicts. This goes with the territory. Successful leaders have to develop skills in conflict resolution to be successful. Few leaders, if any, are able to lead without encountering some level of conflict between (or within) themselves, team members, differing goals and aspirations, and so on. One of the greatest dilemmas is between competitive and accommodating styles of leaders and followers – because the competitive style of leader wants to win, whilst the accommodating leader is prepared to lose in the interests of building harmony, and strengthening relationships and maintaining progress.

One tool for assessing how leaders approach conflict is the Thomas–Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (1974) (see related entries on Avoiding Leadership and Involved Leadership, and Knee-jerk Leadership and Reflective Leadership). This can be used to test how a leader typically responds in debate and discussion, particularly in an area of disagreement, where competitive and accommodating behaviour can be seen as opposites. Thomas and Kilmann’s five conflict modes contrast the highly competitive (always wanting to win) with the accommodating mode (allowing others to win). Other modes, which can be combined with competitive and accommodating behaviour preferences, include: being compromising and deal-making; avoiding conflict wherever possible; and being collaborative, seeking win/win solutions.

When a leader’s strategy and approach – delivered and insisted upon in a very competitive and forceful way – is different from that of the majority, he or she tends to use competitive behaviours. One of the most popular or commonly used preferences of a leader facing a conflict situation, which impacts on the way he or she leads and manages, is competitive behaviour. The opposite – less commonly seen and perhaps less often recognized – is an accommodating style.

How do we define Competitive compared with Accommodating Leadership? A leader who is very competitive is at the top of the assertiveness scale and at the bottom of the cooperativeness scale. A leader who is accommodating is at the bottom of the assertiveness scale but at the top of the cooperativeness scale. Competing is win/lose – someone wins, and someone else must lose. Accommodating, the opposite, is lose/win, because winning this battle is not the most important issue. The leader has deliberately chosen to let the follower or colleague win, which is in contrast with avoiding – this is when he or she has chosen to walk away from the conflict, and is taking a lose/lose approach.





A competitive leader often operates in a power-oriented mode, and uses whatever sources of power available to win ground. This can include legitimate power, his or her ability to argue, to pull rank on another and to exert economic control. The competitive leader may be standing up for his or her beliefs, and may also be anxious to assert his or her primacy. This competitive leader behaviour is often at another's expense. If there are competitive leaders, there must be subordinates who are willing to give way and allow the competitive leader to have what he or she wants.

By contrast, the accommodating leader tends to neglect his or her own concerns to satisfy the concerns of the others first. Sometimes this is purely the result of conflict avoidance. However, accommodation involves self-sacrifice, generosity and yielding to another point of view even if it clashes with one's own. Accommodating-style leaders spend so much time helping others that sometimes they lose sight of what they personally want to achieve. Accommodating leadership can be seen as related to servant leadership (see 'Servant Leadership' section in 'Leadership Definition, Theory and Practice'), but the latter can be more proactive.

The competing mode is common in fields where results are easily measured and compared – sales and investment banking, for example – and in many organizations promotion and rewards are closely linked to competitive behaviour. It can drive decisiveness and clarity, even if insight and understanding are lacking, so can often come to the fore under the pressure of an emergency, even though the desire to win every argument can be very dysfunctional when ideas must be pooled from many sources, and emerging crises require leaders to back down and change direction. Highly competitive leaders can be surrounded by yes-men, people who agree with the leader because they have learned that disagreement may be unwise, or is just not listened to. This can prevent the leader from receiving vital information. Are subordinates afraid to admit uncertainties?

However, a low score for competitiveness could mean that a leader feels powerless in some situations, is unaware of his or her power base or is unable to use it. Does the leader have trouble taking a firm stand? This may be because he or she is overly concerned with others' feelings.

Accommodating as a conflict mode is useful when a leader needs to show they can be reasonable, as well as accepting their own fallibility. Accommodating is appropriate when the issue being discussed is more important to others. It is more than a goodwill gesture, helping to maintain cooperative relationships, building friendships for future benefit and possibly eliciting useful ideas. The accommodating mode is best when continued competition would damage a cause or issue, or when it is most unlikely that the leader in this situation can win. Accommodating helps to preserve a harmonious environment, and also helps subordinates to try things by themselves and learn from their own mistakes. However, the leader with a high score on 'accommodating' may feel that his or her ideas are not getting much attention. Allowing others to keep advancing their concerns can deprive the leader of influence, respect and recognition. Some accommodating leaders may feel that their own contribution will not be obvious. They may not be able to effectively impose discipline at work, but it depends on the extent to which this is needed.

Leaders who are low on accommodating may have trouble building up goodwill with other people, who may see them as unable to admit when they are wrong. It can be challenging for such leaders to recognize legitimate exceptions to rules, and when to give up a line of argument.





Here, we look at an example of a fiercely competitive manager who caused problems even before starting work in a new position, due to her highly competitive nature. In a contrasting case, a junior manager is overwhelmed with conflicting responsibilities due to an accommodating nature.

A consultant working with public-sector organizations tells the story:

A new leader was recently appointed to a senior position in a public-sector organization. Usually, the government is very strict in terms of advertising vacancies and going through proper procedures before appointing anyone. But this particular lady, highly qualified with an MBA and a PhD, who is quite job-hopping and is always going for promotions, put the organization under pressure to hire her quickly, especially as she threatened to try to get another job and then would not be available. The government has a very slender majority in the country and the opposition party is very strong, so this episode became controversial front-page news. If she hadn't been so competitive by insisting that she was appointed – if she had waited for the due processes to take place – maybe this government department would not now be under such fire in the media. So she hasn't started work yet but is already causing difficulties due to her competitive nature. This country where she lives and works has also encouraged this tendency to be competitive among women, as it is very male dominated, so any female who reaches a senior position is bound to be very competitive, because she has to be in order to rival the men.

A trainer working in emerging markets offers this case:

In my work I visit many training institutions and have contact with those who manage them – they give me training assignments and administer the courses I teach. In one particular institution, there is a junior manager (I suppose she has very little hope of ever being promoted) who is so accommodating that she has made her life very difficult and works very long hours, but it's all part of her personality, the corporate culture and the nature of her job. Basically the trainers have certain requirements – such as photocopying training materials – and she always says yes to them to help them out. Then her boss has told her to cut down on photocopying to save money. So she sneaks into the copy room when the boss isn't looking, or asks friends in other departments to help her out. She has two staff members but doesn't trust them much, and gives them only simple tasks to complete, doing nearly all the work herself. The boss gives free places on the courses to friends and contacts, so she lets these 'students' in. But then the trainers ask – 'who is this?' and she has to hope they won't mind. There are rules associated with training and academic standards, and she is constantly in a conflict with these rules, trying to please everyone. She tries to please her bossy boss, her demanding trainees and her difficult trainers – she never says no to anyone. Her behaviour would appear to be out of fear, job-security worries, natural friendliness and warmth, and an anxiety to please everyone. But her workload is huge and she gets home very late every evening, and comes in on weekends when many of the training events take place to make sure everything is running smoothly and to see if she can do anything to help.

Being competitive and accommodating are wide extremes – the one always wanting to win and gain personal advantages, the other prepared to sacrifice personal time to keep everyone happy. Again, neither mode is totally effective as leadership roles as these extremes of behaviour can backfire. It is impossible to





win all the time, and probably not advisable to allow others to win all the time. Competitive leaders can appear unapproachable, selfish and too aggressive. Accommodating leaders can be too compliant and insufficiently assertive. Neither necessarily successfully gains the respect of their peers.

FURTHER READING

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key concepts in
leadership

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Analytical Leadership and an Intuitive, Instant Leadership Approach

Detailed organization charts and an emphasis on planning characterize the approach of several leaders; by contrast, others 'fly by the seat of their pants'.

Closely related to Involved Leadership and Reflective Leadership (see Avoiding Leadership and Involved Leadership, Knee-jerk Leadership and Reflective

