

# Interpersonal Conflict Handling Styles:

## A Survey of Chinese College Students<sup>1</sup>

### STYLES DE REGLEMENT DU CONFLIT INTERPERSONNEL :

### UNE ENQUETE SUR LES ETUDIANTS CHINOIS

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**Abstract:** Thomas-Klimann Conflict Mode Instrument is a basic model for understanding and comparing interpersonal conflict handling styles. Individuals handle interpersonal conflict in various strategies, and may have a natural tendency toward one or two of these strategies. This research based on Thomas-Klimann Conflict Mode Instrument, investigated college students' preference and use of these styles in interpersonal conflict, and analyzed it with MANOVA (multivariate analysis of variance). The results showed that: (1) college students' preference and use of interpersonal conflict handling styles in order from high to low is compromising—collaborating—competing—accommodating—avoiding; (2) there were significant differences between males and females on competing style.

**Key words:** college students, interpersonal conflict, styles

**Résumé:** L'Instrument du mode de conflit Thomas-Klimann est un modèle de base pour comprendre et comparer les styles de règlement du conflit interpersonnel. Les individus résolvent les conflits interpersonnels avec des stratégies variantes, mais ils ont une tendance naturelle à une ou deux d'entre elles. Cet essai, basé sur l'Instrument du mode de conflit Thomas-Klimann, étudie la préférence et l'utilisation de ces styles dans les conflits interpersonnels et les analyse avec MANOVA (multivariate analysis of variance). Les résultats montrent que : premièrement, l'ordre du haut en bas de la préférence et l'utilisation des styles de règlement du conflit interpersonnel des étudiants est : compromis- collaboration- compétition- accomodement- évitement ; deuxièmement, il y a des différences significantes entre les hommes et les femmes sur le style de compéition.

**Mots-Clés:** étudiants, conflit interpersonnel, styles

## 1. INTRODUCTION

What is conflict? Thomas defined it as a “process which begins when one party perceives that another has frustrated, or is about to frustrate, some concern of his” (Thomas, 1992). Interpersonal conflict is a pervasive psychological phenomenon. It exists almost everywhere.

There are three views about conflict: positive,

negative and balance. The positive view claims that the organization of the conflict can be a positive force. Conflict resolution process can stimulate the enthusiasm generated within an organization, this process may not only lead to a revolution and change, but also more likely to make changes to be accepted. The negative view insists that conflict could have serious negative effects for making efforts deviate from goal, and depleting resources, especially time and money. If serious, the conflict of thoughts, ideas and beliefs may lead to anger,

<sup>1</sup> This Study is supported by NSFC No. 70232010; Zhejiang Social science Fund No.Z04GL02; Tenth Five Education planning Fund No.DFB010580.

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\*Received 1 July 2006 ; accepted 25 August 2006

tension and anxiety. The balanced view, which synthesizes the above two arguments, deems that the conflict may sometimes be what we hope, and at other times could be destructive. Although some conflicts can be avoided and reduced, others must be solved and managed properly. Thus it can be seen that, the conflict itself does not inevitably harm relations, the key lies in the strategy for dealing with conflict.

About the strategy, there is no best or worst conflict handling style. In such circumstance considered to be the best style may be ineffective in other cases, in that case the worst style is probably suitable under other circumstances. In other words, conflict dealing styles are situation-specific. However, the conflict preferences and behaviors of individuals for one or several styles are relatively steady. Therefore, it is worthwhile and meaningful to know one's own preference and then learn which style is most effective in a given situation.

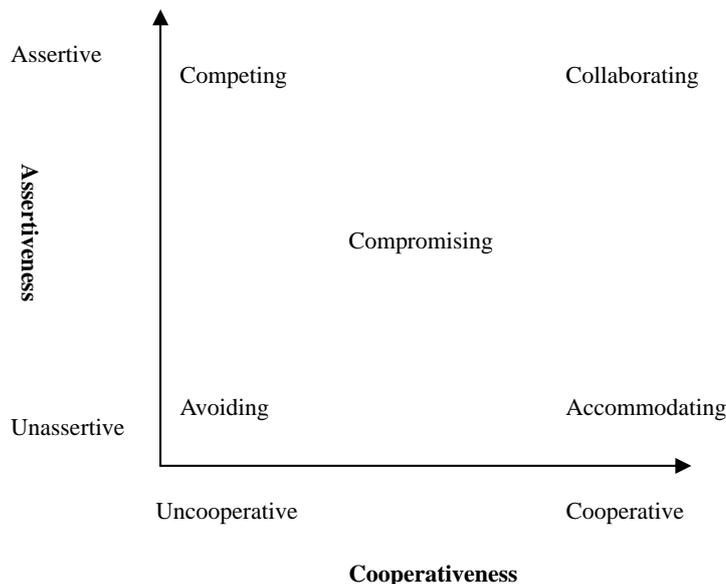
As just described, interpersonal conflict is a universal phenomenon in human relations, it is inevitable in organizations. College students, a special social group, also face various interpersonal conflicts. If not handled properly, conflict will affect learning environment, efficiency, and even normal life. Well managed, conflict can be positive. In brainstorm or forum, conflict is a

better catalyst for inspiration than consensus. This survey attempts to study and discuss Chinese college students' preferences and uses of conflict styles in their daily life.

## 2. THOMAS-KLIMANN CONFLICT MODE INSTRUMENT

There are many models of Interpersonal conflicts, among which Thomas-Klimann Conflict Mode Instrument (usually called MODE or TKI for short, here use the former) is the most widely used approach in both academic and applied domain. It is a two-dimension model, which derived from Blake and Mouton managerial grid (1964). The two dimensions are assertiveness (the desire to satisfy one's own concern) and cooperativeness (the desire to satisfy the concerns of others). Assertiveness is on the x-axis and cooperativeness is on the y-axis, the two-dimensional space defined conflict handling styles into five categories, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Two-dimensional Conflict Handling Model (Thomas & Kilmann, 1974)



*Collaborating*: assertive and cooperative, to achieve a “win-win” result for both parties involved in organization. It encourages mutual respect, open communication, and full participation by all parties. Collaborators believe that conflict itself is neither good nor bad, effective solutions that everybody supports will maximize the interests of all people.

*Compromising*: intermediate assertive and cooperative, a balanced style for win and lose. This style's assumption is that it is unrealistic for everybody to be satisfied fully. Each party wins something they

want at the expense of sacrificing partial interests.

*Competing*: assertive and uncooperative, a typical “win-lose” style, only one purpose: to win. Competitors' attitude is that their own ideas, values, and goals are extremely important, and in their eyes conflict is equal to competition and even war. If necessary they will attempt to use all kinds of means to defeat the other party.

*Accommodating*: unassertive and cooperative, relationship is the first treasure in this style, more important than the result. The accommodator will do

their best to preserve their relationships with opposing party. They often consider others' concerns rather than their own. They always give in and give in set their interests aside, and please others blindly.

*Avoiding*: unassertive and uncooperative, a "lose-lose" mode. Some people describe it as "a decision not to decide". The avoiders usually think that, "It is not my business." They will escape from getting involved in the conflict for various reasons, for instance, they foresee no solution is meaningful and useful, they are tired of this type of conflict, or they don't want to take responsibility for solving the conflict.

Thomas and Klimann put forward that every individual is capable of using all five conflict-handling modes; nobody can be characterized as having a single, rigid style of dealing with conflict. However, it may be possible that some people will use some modes more readily than others and therefore tend to rely upon those modes more heavily. The conflict behaviors individuals use are the result of both their personal predispositions and the requirements of the situations in which they find themselves. Also, their social skills may lead them to rely upon some conflict behaviors more or less than others. The uses of these five styles are as illustrated in Table 1.

**Table 1 Conflict Modes and Their Uses  
(Thomas & Kilmann, 1974)**

Conflict Mode	Uses
Competing	-When rapid decision-making is critical -where issues are critical and unpopular decisions must be made -Where issues are critical to the company and the decision-maker is confident of their decision -In a competitive environment where you risk being taken advantage of by being noncompetitive
Collaborating	-When goals of both parties must be met -When the process of understanding both your own goals and those competitor are critical -When incorporation of multiple perspectives is critical -When commitment is critical -When it is necessary to resolve past feeling of ill will
Compromising	-When objectives are only somewhat important and disruption is the greater risk -When strong opponents pursue mutually exclusive objectives -When time is critical -When collaboration or competition fail
Avoiding	-When an issue does not warrant attention -When potential for success is limited -When risk exceeds potential benefit -When reflection is warranted -When more information is required -When others can resolve the situation more readily -When the issue is related to another more fundamental issue
Accommodating	-When your position is indefensible -When the issue is unimportant to you -To gain favor -When you are about to lose -When preserving the peace is critical -To allow others to learn from experience

### 3. METHOD

#### 3.1 Sample

The sample for this survey consisted of 400 college students from six universities and colleges in Zhejiang Province. These students were all assessed using the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument, a form of questionnaire, but the effective sample size is 399. Table 2 shows the distribution of respondents.

#### 3.2 Instrument

Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument consists of 30 pairs of items, each numbered item contains

two statements that describe how people deal with conflict. Respondents are asked to distribute 5 points between each pair of statements. Give the highest number of points to the statement that more accurately reflects their likely response. For example, if response (a) strongly describes their behaviors, then record

5 a.

0 b.

However, if (a) and (b) are both characteristic, but (b) is slightly more characteristic of their behaviors than (a), then record

2 a.

3 b.

Respondents are told definitely that there are no universal right answers and the responses remain

anonymous.

Test-Retest Reliabilities of the MODE ranges from .61-.68 and Cronbach alpha .43-.71 (Rahim, as cited in Michael, Thomas & Jerry, 2001, p.317) as indicated in Table 3.

### 3.3 Data Analysis

Data analysis is done with SPSS 10.0. MANOVA (multivariate analysis of variance) is used, with the five conflict-handling modes as dependent variables, university, gender, grade, whether only-child, and from urban/rural as independent variables.

**Table 2 Distribution of The Respondents**

Characteristic		N	%
University	Public	199	49.9
	Private	200	50.0
Gender	Male	153	38.3
	Female	246	61.7
Grade	Sr.	107	26.8
	Jr.	292	73.2
Whether only-child	Yes	186	46.6
	No	213	53.4
From urban/rural	Urban	194	48.6
	Rural	205	51.4
Major	Arts	182	45.6
	Science	47	11.8
	Engineering	85	21.3
	Agriculture	17	4.3
	Commerce	57	14.3
	Medicine	9	2.3
	Others	2	0.5

**Table 3 Reliabilities of The MODE**

	Internal Consistency (Cronbach Alpha)	Test-Retest Reliabilities of scores
Avoiding	.62	.68
Competing	.71	.61
Compromising	.58	.66
Accommodating	.43	.62
Collaborating	.65	.63
Mean	.60	.64

## 4. RESULTS

### 4.1 Overall

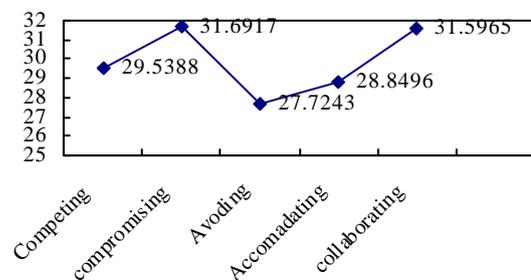
Overall the most frequently used modes of handling conflict were compromising and cooperating, followed by competing and accommodating, at least is avoiding (Table 4).

**Table 4 Uses of conflict modes**

	MIN	MAX	M	SD
Competing	11.00	49.00	29.5388	6.5989
Compromising	17.00	46.00	31.6917	4.9381
Avoiding	8.00	45.00	27.7243	4.8999
Accommodating	12.00	47.00	28.8496	5.7883
Collaborating	15.00	46.00	31.5965	4.6673

This tendency can be seen more intuitively using broken line in Figure 2. We can conclude that Chinese college students tend to be assertive and cooperative.

**Figure 2 Uses of conflict modes**



### 4.2 University

Both public and private universities are amazingly similar to the whole sample in solving conflict. By frequency ranked from high to low as compromising-

collaborating- competing- accommodating- avoiding (collaborating is slightly higher than compromising in public universities). The result indicates that there is no significant difference between the means for public and private universities students (Table 5).

**Table 5 Uses of conflict modes with respect to university ( $M \pm SD$ )**

	Public (199)	Private (200)	a) F
<i>Competing</i>	29.42±6.63	29.66±6.58	.607
<i>Compromising</i>	31.61±5.03	31.78±4.85	
<i>Avoiding</i>	27.58±4.86	27.87±4.94	
<i>Accommodating</i>	29.24±5.73	28.47±5.84	
<i>Collaborating</i>	31.67±4.84	31.52±4.50	

\* $p < 0.05$  \*\* $p < 0.01$

### 4.3 Gender

In Table 6, finding resulting from MANOVA in relation to gender illuminates that, a significant difference ( $p < .01$ ) exists between male and female students. Further

one-way ANOVA (analysis of variance) finds significant difference only exists in the mode competing ( $F=8.50$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Men are more likely to be assertive and uncooperative.

**Table 6 Uses of conflict modes with respect to gender ( $M \pm SD$ )**

	Male (153)	Female (246)	a) F
<i>Competing</i>	30.86±6.26	28.72±6.68	3.620**
<i>Compromising</i>	31.27±5.13	31.96±4.81	
<i>Avoiding</i>	27.72±4.63	27.73±5.07	
<i>Accommodating</i>	28.32±6.00	29.18±5.64	
<i>Collaborating</i>	30.92±4.37	32.02±4.81	

### 4.4 Grade

No significant difference with regard to grade as

illustrated in Table 7.

**Table 7 Uses of conflict modes with respect to grade ( $M \pm SD$ )**

	Sr. (107)	Jr. (292)	a) F
<i>Competing</i>	28.93±6.13	29.76±6.76	.656
<i>Compromising</i>	31.50±4.75	31.76±5.01	
<i>Avoiding</i>	28.16±4.68	27.57±4.97	
<i>Accommodating</i>	29.22±5.56	28.71±5.87	
<i>Collaborating</i>	31.76±4.62	31.54±4.69	

### 4.5 Whether only-child

Whether only-child or not is also a factor which affects

how to react in conflict. But the research results are out of our expectation. Table 8 represents very similar profiles between them.

**Table 8 Uses of conflict modes with respect to whether only-child ( $M \pm SD$ )**

	Yes (186)	No (213)	a)	F
<i>Competing</i>	29.95±6.63	29.18±6.56		1.374
<i>Compromising</i>	31.57±5.15	31.80±4.75		
<i>Avoiding</i>	27.89±4.68	27.58±5.09		
<i>Accommodating</i>	28.90±6.21	28.81±5.41		
<i>Collaborating</i>	31.22±4.66	31.93±4.66		

#### 4.6 From urban/rural

The findings in Table 8 are quite funny. We anticipated

that the origin may be a decisive variable here. However, the findings are really contrary. The tendencies of these two groups are extremely consistent.

**Table 8 Uses of conflict modes with respect to from urban/rural ( $M \pm SD$ )**

	Urban (194)	Rural (205)	F
<i>Competing</i>	29.48±6.74	29.60±6.48	.768
<i>Compromising</i>	31.60±4.87	31.78±5.01	
<i>Avoiding</i>	27.79±4.70	27.66±5.10	
<i>Accommodating</i>	28.88±5.86	28.82±5.74	
<i>Collaborating</i>	31.54±4.99	31.65±4.35	

### 5. DISCUSSION

To some extent, the tendency of overall Chinese college students demonstrates China's traditional culture and values. As we all know, "harmony" is the core of Confucius ideology, which affects China more than two thousand years. Nobody hope to break the balance and peace, especially when the conflict will bring a danger or even a disaster. Therefore, compromising becomes the most popular conflict handling style among Chinese students.

If deduce only according to Chinese traditional culture such as Confucianism and the like, we may conclude that Chinese favor avoiding and accommodating most, but the fact is not. Guoquan Chen and Dean Tjosvold found that "a cooperative approach to conflict leads to distributive, procedural, and interactive forms of justice which in turn promote team effectiveness. In contrast, an avoiding approach was found to predict injustice and team ineffectiveness. Unexpectedly, a competitive approach was not as consistently related to injustice as avoiding conflict" (Guoquan Chen, Dean Tjosvold, 2002). It seems to be consistent with the results of this article, that is, avoiding

and accommodating are the last two approaches people will choose, the next is competing, and collaborating and compromising are the most acceptable.

Statistics showed that males and females have markedly different preferences in competing strategy. Compared with women, men are more self-centered, and they consider themselves more. Possible reasons: First, the differences in their gender roles result in two different options, men are generally strong, bold, impulsive, independent, and women behave effeminately, timidly, hesitantly, dependently. Second, social psychology research indicates that social gender-behavior expectations lead to the differences too. Men are expected to be more powerful, women more gentle. Such habitual thinking runs through the whole gender education, affecting everybody's life. For example, how to dress, how to speak, how to play, and of course including how to face conflicts.

Research has illuminated that there are no group differences in university, gender, grade, whether only-child, from urban/rural, and major. Maybe the students from public and private universities will be different in the conflict between teachers and students or other aspects, just like the interview results. This requires us to make further studies. Another unexpected result is that the high-grade and low-grade

students in each conflict management strategy are no differences. There are two possible explanations: First, university students have basically shaped values in senior high school; second, guidance on life and values is probably not enough at university stage. Of course the above two points would need further evidence to support. The variable whether only-child has no influence on the choices of college students. In China, people often call the only-child as "Little Emperor" or "Little Sun". They worry only-child will be more arrogant and willful than non-only-child, weaker in dealing with interpersonal relationship. But the reality has proved that this worry is not necessary. During the interview, the author even found that, in conflict, the only-child more often than non-only-child performance rational, magnanimous, and mature. Meanwhile, the survey discovered that the difference between rural and urban areas is extremely small. So can we conclude that along with China's reform and opening up, the urban-rural gap has been

gradually reduced?

## 6. CONCLUSION

During the study conditions, the following conclusions can be drawn: First, college students' preference and use of interpersonal conflict handling styles in order from high to low is compromising — collaborating — competing — accommodating — avoiding; second, In addition to the mandatory two-and cooperation - oriented strategy in the presence of a significant nature of gender differences, the five conflict handling styles have no significant differences in university, gender, grade, whether only-child and from urban/rural, in addition to the significant differences between males and females on competing.

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## APPENDIX

### Instructions

Each numbered item contains two statements that describe how people deal with conflict. Distribute 5 points between each pair of statements. The statement that more accurately reflects your likely response should receive the highest number of points. For example, if response (a) strongly describes your behavior, then record

5 a.

0 b.

However, if (a) and (b) are both characteristic, but (b) is slightly more characteristic of your behavior than (a), then record

2 a.

3 b.

\_\_\_\_\_ a. I am most comfortable letting others take responsibility for solving a problem.

\_\_\_\_\_ b. Rather than negotiate differences, I stress those points for which agreement is

obvious.

- \_\_\_ a. I pride myself in finding compromise solutions.
- \_\_\_ b. I examine all the issues involved in any disagreement.
- \_\_\_ a. I usually persist in pursuing my side of an issue.
- \_\_\_ b. I prefer to soothe others' feelings and preserve relationships.
- \_\_\_ a. I pride myself in finding compromise solutions.
- \_\_\_ b. I usually sacrifice my wishes for the wishes of a peer.
- \_\_\_ a. I consistently seek a peer's help in finding solutions.
- \_\_\_ b. I do whatever is necessary to avoid tension.
- \_\_\_ a. As a rule, I avoid dealing with conflict.
- \_\_\_ b. I defend my position and push my view.
- \_\_\_ a. I postpone dealing with conflict until I have had some time to think it over.
- \_\_\_ b. I am willing to give up some points if others give up some too.
- \_\_\_ a. I use my influence to have my views accepted.
- \_\_\_ b. I attempt to get all concerns and issues immediately out in the open.
- \_\_\_ a. I feel that most differences are not worth worrying about.
- \_\_\_ b. I make a strong effort to get my way on issues I care about.
- \_\_\_ a. Occasionally I use my authority or technical knowledge to get my way.
- \_\_\_ b. I prefer compromise solutions to problems.
- \_\_\_ a. I believe that a team can reach a better solution than any one person can working independently
- \_\_\_ b. I often defer to the wishes of others.
- \_\_\_ a. I usually avoid taking positions that would create controversy.
- \_\_\_ b. I'm willing to give a little if a peer will give a little too.
- \_\_\_ a. I generally propose the middle ground as a solution.
- \_\_\_ b. I consistently press to "sell" my viewpoint.
- \_\_\_ a. I prefer to hear everyone's side of an issue before making judgments.
- \_\_\_ b. I demonstrate the logic and benefits of my position.
- \_\_\_ a. I would rather give in than argue about trivialities.
- \_\_\_ b. I avoid being "put on the spot".
- \_\_\_ a. I refuse to hurt a peer's feelings.
- \_\_\_ b. I will defend my rights as a team member.
- \_\_\_ a. I am usually firm in pursuing my point of view.
- \_\_\_ b. I'll walk away from disagreements before someone gets hurt.
- \_\_\_ a. If it makes peers happy, I will agree with them.
- \_\_\_ b. I believe that give-and-take is the best way to resolve any disagreement.
- \_\_\_ a. I prefer to have everyone involved in a conflict generate alternatives together.
- \_\_\_ b. When the team is discussing a serious problem, I usually keep quiet.
- \_\_\_ a. I would rather openly resolve conflict than conceal differences.
- \_\_\_ b. I seek ways to balance gains and losses for equitable solutions.
- \_\_\_ a. In problem solving, I am usually considerate of peers' viewpoints.
- \_\_\_ b. I prefer a direct and objective discussion of any disagreement.
- \_\_\_ a. I seek solutions that meet some of everyone's needs.

- \_\_\_ b. I will argue as long as necessary to get my position heard.
- \_\_\_ a. I like to assess the problem and identify a mutually agreeable solution.
- \_\_\_ b. When people challenge my position, I simply ignore them.
- \_\_\_ a. If peers feel strongly about a position, I defer to it even if I don't agree.
- \_\_\_ b. I am willing to settle for a compromise solution.
- \_\_\_ a. I am very persuasive when I have to be to win in a conflict situation.
- \_\_\_ b. I believe in the saying, "Kill your enemies with kindness."
- \_\_\_ a. I will bargain with peers in an effort to manage disagreement.
- \_\_\_ b. I listen attentively before expressing my views.
- \_\_\_ a. I avoid taking controversial positions.
- \_\_\_ b. I'm willing to give up my position for the benefit of the group.
- \_\_\_ a. I enjoy competitive situations and "play" hard to win.
- \_\_\_ b. Whenever possible, I seek out knowledgeable peers to help resolve disagreements.
- \_\_\_ a. I will surrender some of my demands, but I have to get something in return.
- \_\_\_ b. I don't like to air differences and usually keep my concerns to myself.
- \_\_\_ a. I generally avoid hurting a peer's feelings.
- \_\_\_ b. When a peer and I disagree, I prefer to bring the issue out into the open so we can discuss it.

### Scoring

Record your response (number of points) in the space next to each statement number below and then sum the points in each column.

Column 1	Column 2	Column 3	Column 4	Column 5	Column
3 (a) ___	2 (a) ___	1 (a) ___	1 (b) ___	2 (b) ___	
6 (b) ___	4 (a) ___	5 (b) ___	3 (b) ___	5 (a) ___	
8 (a) ___	7 (b) ___	6 (a) ___	4 (b) ___	8 (b) ___	
9 (b) ___	10 (b) ___	7 (a) ___	11 (b) ___	11 (a) ___	
10 (a) ___	12 (b) ___	9 (a) ___	15 (a) ___	14 (a) ___	
13 (b) ___	13 (a) ___	12 (a) ___	16 (a) ___	19 (a) ___	
14 (b) ___	18 (b) ___	15 (b) ___	18 (a) ___	20 (a) ___	
16 (b) ___	20 (b) ___	17 (b) ___	21 (a) ___	21 (b) ___	
17 (a) ___	22 (a) ___	19 (b) ___	24 (a) ___	23 (a) ___	
22 (b) ___	24 (b) ___	23 (b) ___	25 (b) ___	26 (b) ___	
25 (a) ___	26 (a) ___	27 (a) ___	27 (b) ___	28 (b) ___	
28 (a) ___	29 (a) ___	29 (b) ___	30 (a) ___	30 (b) ___	
Total ___					

Next, carry over the totals from the column totals and then plot your total scores on the following chart to show the profile of your conflict handling styles. A total score of 36 to 45 for each style, such as the forcing style in column 1, may indicate a strong preference and use of that style. A total score of 0 to 18 for each style, such as the Compromising style in column 2, may indicate little preference and use of that style. A total score of 19 to 35 for each style may indicate a moderate preference and use of that style.

	Total	0	10	20	30	40	50	60
Column1 (Forcing)	_____	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Column 2		•	•	•	•	•	•	•

(Compromising)	_____	_____
Column 3		• • • • • •
(Avoiding)	_____	_____
Column 4		• • • • • •
(Accommodating)	_____	_____
Column 5		• • • • • •
(Collaborating)	_____	_____

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