

The Basics of Collaborative Problem Solving



LifeWorks Learning Solutions

Learning Handout



My problem-solving style – a self-assessment

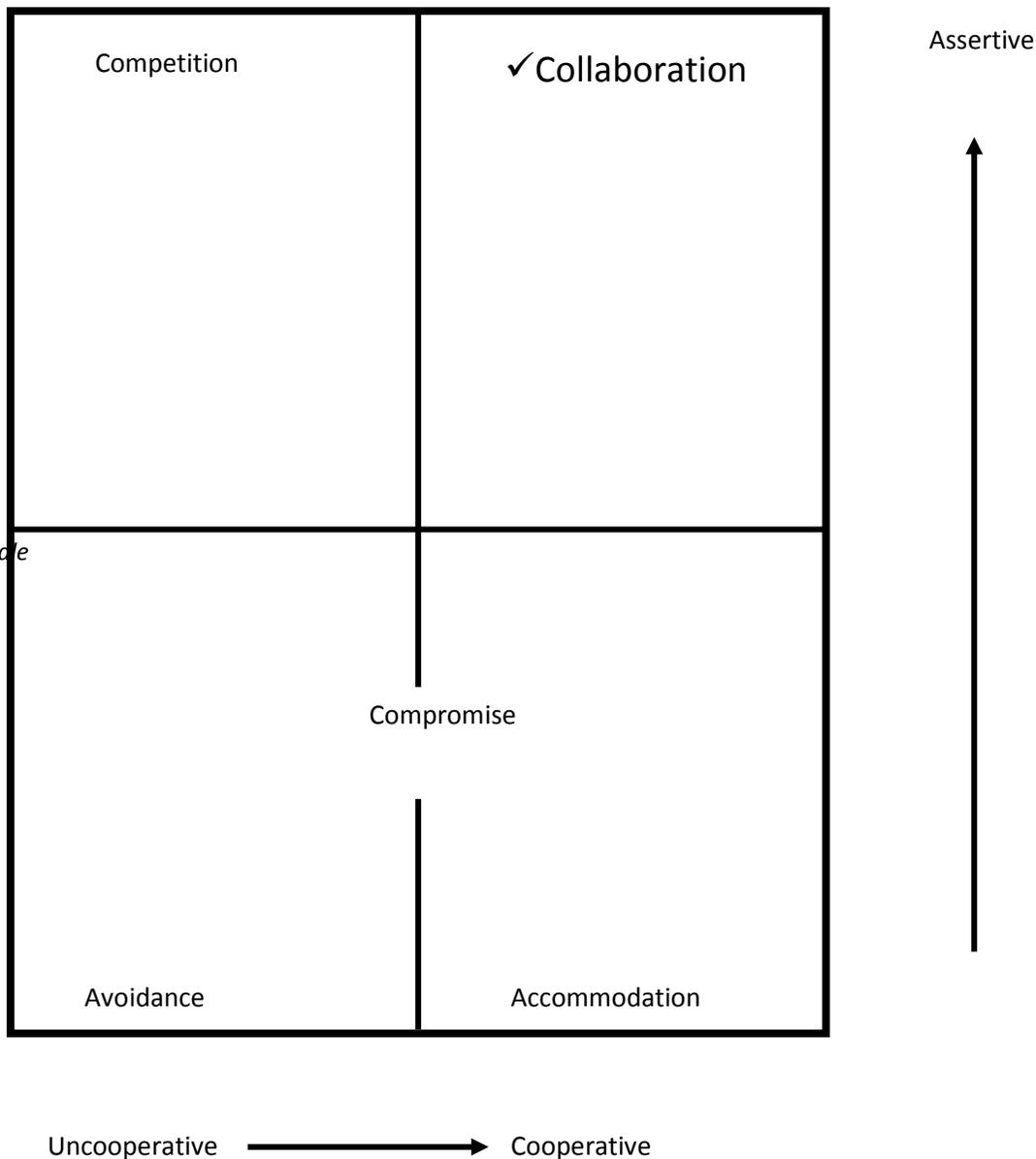
1.	A.	I frequently let the other person take responsibility for solving the problem.
	B.	I frequently just focus on what the other person and I agree upon and ignore the areas in which we disagree.
2.	A.	I usually work towards compromise.
	B.	I sometimes sacrifice my own point of view so that the other person can preserve his/hers.
3.	A.	My goals are paramount in problem solving.
	B.	I usually soothe the other person's feelings for the sake of our relationship.
4.	A.	I seek the other person's help in resolving differences.
	B.	I prefer to resolve the differences on my own.
5.	A.	I'm willing to do what it takes to avoid tension when there are differences.
	B.	I try to win my position.
6.	A.	Differences are not always worth worrying about.
	B.	I try to get my way in spite of differences.
7.	A.	I tell the other person my thoughts and ideas and ask for his/hers.
	B.	I try to get the other person to accept the merits of my position.
8.	A.	I try to get all the concerns and issues out in the open.
	B.	I try to postpone the issue until I've had time to think it over.
9.	A.	I attempt to work through the differences with the other person.
	B.	I try to find a fair balance of gains and losses for both of us.

The following are pairs of statements that describe possible responses to a problem situation. For each pair, choose the statement (A or B) that best represents how you would respond when you are problem solving with another person.



Conflict styles

This model, based on the “Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode,” illustrates behaviours that people typically assume when problem solving with others.





Appropriate use of conflict styles

The following are examples of appropriate situations for each conflict style:

■ **Avoiding:**

- Issue is not important
- When situational factors preclude productive conflict management: no time, no energy, need for more information, wrong place
- If one person is overly emotional or unwilling to problem solve

■ **Accommodating:**

- Unimportant issue or you're wrong
- Situation when maintaining harmony is crucial
- Person has legitimate authority

■ **Competing:**

- Crisis/emergency
- Losing could hurt the integrity or self-respect of either party
- Other styles haven't worked

■ **Compromising:**

- Temporary solution until collaboration solution is possible
- Collaboration is impossible
- Negotiation is important to maintain relationship
- Moderately important goals to both people

■ **Collaborating:**

- An important issue and/or relationship
- In most conflicts, except when other style is more appropriate



More on problem-solving styles

These two columns of behaviours can help you identify whether you are highly competitive as a problem solver or tend to be collaborative.

Competitive

Collaborative

Sees participants as adversaries.	Sees participants as equals.
Has self-victory as the goal.	Has mutual agreement as the goal.
Demands concessions as a condition of the relationship.	Makes concessions to keep relationship intact.
Is hard on the problem and the people.	Is soft on the people and hard on the problem.
Distrusts others.	Trusts others.
Is inflexible.	Is flexible.
Makes threats.	Makes offers and suggestions.
Searches for the right answer, i.e., the one you will accept.	Searches for the right answer, i.e., the one both can live with.
Insists on own position.	Insists on agreement.
Make the situation a contest of wills.	Makes the situation an exercise in valuing both positions.



Applying the problem-solving model – worksheet

This worksheet can help you begin the process of resolving a problem that you and another person have. Together, discuss and record ideas for each step.

Step #1: Define the problem. Create a problem statement.

Step #2: Identify goals for resolution. What do you want to have happen as a result of resolving the problem?

Step #3: Create an “idea bank.” Brainstorm all possible suggestions without judging them.

Step #4: Evaluate the ideas. Look at the merit of each idea/suggestion; compare them.

Step #5: Choose the most desirable solution. Select the idea/suggestion, etc. that provides a win/win for both parties.



Step #6: Make a plan. Decide on how you will implement the solution.

Step #7: Implement the plan. Indicate the time, deadlines, etc.

Step #8: Evaluate the outcomes. At a later date, review how the resolution is working. If one party isn't satisfied, you may need to return to steps 3 and 4.



What counts?

When problem solving in a collaborative manner, the following approaches can be useful:

- Communicate effectively (listen fully and use assertive skills).
- Keep the relationship intact.
- Value differences of opinions.
- Have a goal or outcome.
- Use creative brainstorming.
- Collaborate for a win/win.
- Tolerate a certain level of ambiguity while seeking clarity.
- Think critically.
- Focus on the ideas, not the personalities.
- Let go, if necessary.



Case studies - exercise

Think about how you would problem solve these situations.

Case study #1 – You are assigned to work with a co-worker on a special project. So far, that person has not helped with the project. The deadline is getting closer. In order to finish, you must enlist the other person's help.

Case study #2 – You have made a fairly serious error at work. Your supervisor has discovered it and has come down quite harshly on you. She's labeled you negligent and careless.

Case study #3 – It is 5:15 PM. As you begin to clear off your desk for the day, your boss comes in with an important project that must be out in the morning. You need to pick up your child from day care by 6:00 or pay a late fee.

Case study #4 – You and your partner are saving for a down payment on a house. One Friday afternoon your partner comes home, tells you about his/her harrowing day, and informs you that he/she has just booked both of you on a seven-day Caribbean cruise.

Case study #5 – You've made a date to meet a friend for dinner. You're sitting in the restaurant waiting. Your friend comes in more than a half-hour late, sits down, and without reference to his/her lateness, asks, "How are you?"

Case study #6 – It's 10:30 PM, and you are exhausted. Your teenager comes to you with a request for a particular outfit that needs to be washed and ironed. He/she states that he/she *has* to wear it tomorrow.

Case study #7 – You have been expecting a promotion and soon discover that the position went to another colleague. You had informed your supervisor that you were very interested in the position and believed that you would be the selected candidate.