Working Definitions of Conflict and Conflict Styles*

Conflict

In *Interpersonal Conflict*, William Wilmot and Joyce Hocker define conflict as an **expressed struggle** *between at least two* **interdependent parties** *who* **perceive scarce rewards, incompatible goals,** *and* **interference** *from one another in achieving those goals*.

Key considerations include:

1. **expressed struggle**

   This approach to conflict takes a communication perspective. Individuals might *feel* conflicted or ambivalent or torn or stuck, but the focus here is how conflict is manifested <u>between</u> persons. Manifestations may be as explicit as war, or yelling, or as nuanced as "not coming around as much anymore," or "less enthusiastic" work performance.

   Pressing oneself to note and articulate behaviors that "express struggle" is a first step toward resolving conflict, because behavior is **data**. We are likely to disagree about interpretations and judgments, but we can often agree on what *all* participants can see and hear. Remember, that behavior can include what <u>didn't</u> occur as well as what did.

2. **interdependence and interference**

   Think of *interdependence* as two-way influence: What you say and do affects—or has the potential to affect—me, and what I do affects or can affect you. We don't tend to "fight" with others if they are inconsequential in our lives.

3. **experience of *scarce resources***

   If there was plenty of everything for everybody, we wouldn't fight. "Resources" are "what's at **stake**" for participants. In addition to, and underlying, more obvious **substantive interests**, we often struggle with others over *how* to work things out (**procedural** or **process interests**), **emotional interests**, and **inter-personal interests** (negotiation of identities and relationships). Adding to the challenge is the fact that participants are often unaware of some of their interests.

   The phrase "experience of" is added because participants act on their perceptions, regardless of anyone's judgment of the perspective's "accuracy."

4. **experience of incompatible goals**

   We often establish **positions** when we are in conflict. We hold *expectations* and/or make *demands*. Regarding the *interests* addressed above, we experience wants regarding **how much** or **what kind** of various resources is fair/appropriate. In a personal relationship, the "scarce resource" might be *love*. At work, it might be *respect*.

Thomas and Kilmann's Conflict Styles
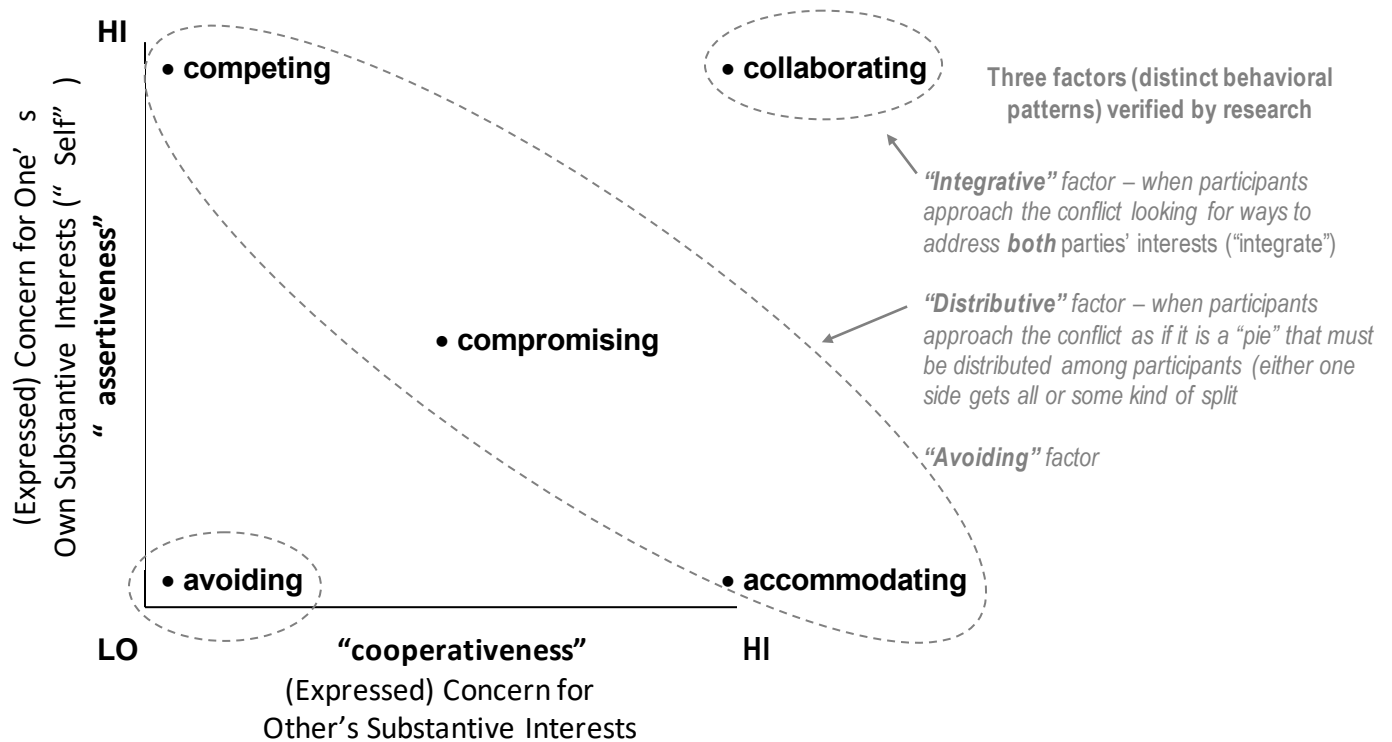
Working Definitions

1. ***Competing*** – doing whatever it takes to get what you want

2. ***Avoiding*** – doing little or nothing about anyone's substantive interests

3. ***Accommodating*** – "giving in"; "going belly up"

4. ***Compromising*** – heading into the process with the assumption that in order to get at least some of what you want, each participant will have to give up some

5. ***Collaborating*** – putting time and energy together into generating mutually satisfying outcomes

Caveats

- These ***tendencies*** are not the same as ***outcomes***.
- "Expressed" concern is not the same as ***actual*** concern.
- Any given style is more or less effective depending upon the context and other styles in play.
- All of us employ multiple approaches, often at the same time; one might also employ a given approach in order to achieve a different outcome (accommodate now to "win" later).
- The value of the model is less about "pigeon-holing" yourself into a single "style" than it is about recognizing that, when and how you slip into a "default," "automatic" way of reacting to conflict.