Polarization in the Workplace: Navigating Opposing Viewpoints Constructively
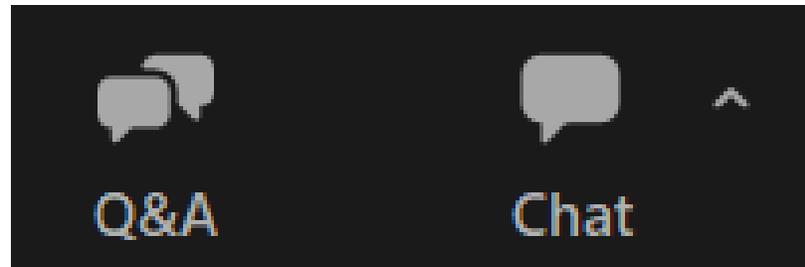
Presented by Gail Fann Thomas, EdD

April 22, 2025

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Before We Get Started

- Webinar is being recorded

- Slides will be sent out, along with resources

- Submit questions at any time using the Q&A

- Feel free to use the chat to share what you're thinking throughout the webinar

Gail Fann Thomas, EdD

Educator, author, consultant, executive coach

Taught graduate management and executive education at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, CA for more than 30 years

Specializes in communication, building collaborative capacity, conflict management, and team development

Currently working with private sector organizations and several federal agencies

Mediator for Restorative Justice Program

Published more than 60 academic articles, chapters and technical reports; co-author TKI Team Report.

Lives in Monterey, CA

Poll

What's your experience helping others navigate polarization at work?

A. I train, coach, facilitate, or consult with individuals or teams about managing polarization at work.

B. I am a manager, CEO, or HR director who approves or manages programs about addressing polarization at work.

C. We don't address polarization in the workplace.

D. Other (please specify in chat box)

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Agenda

Polarization in the Workplace

- Definition of Polarization
- From Disagreement to Polarization
- Extent of the Problem
- Causes of Polarization
- Costs and Benefits

A Framework for Thinking about Polarization

- Polarization and Conflict Management
- Five Approaches to Handling Conflict
- Win-Lose Framing
- Competing and Its Undesirable Risks

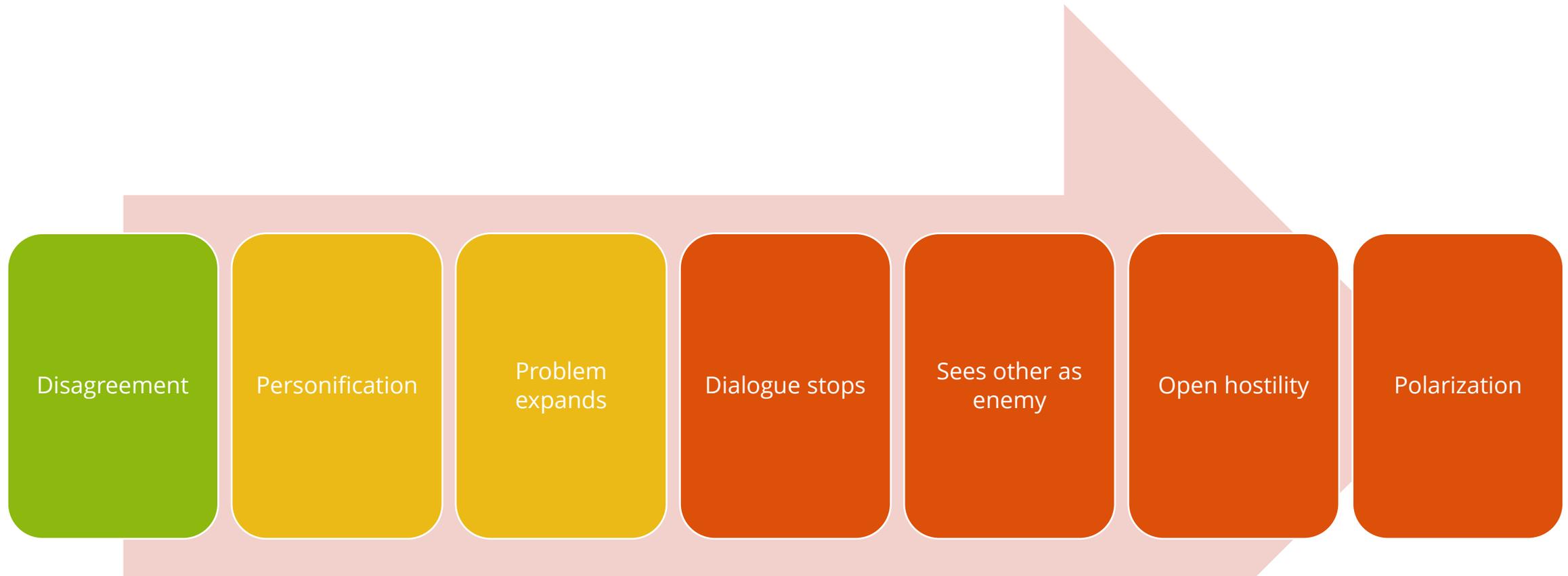**Strategies for Addressing Polarization**

- Seven Exercises That Address Polarization
- What Leaders Can Do to Manage Polarization

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Definition of Polarization in the Workplace

- A division of two sharply contrasting groups or sets of opinions, beliefs, or interests

- Can take many forms—from political polarization to clashing opinions on hot-button, companywide issues (e.g., return-to-office mandates) to intense disagreement over decisions in team projects

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How Disagreements Can Escalate to Polarization

| Disagreement | Personification | Problem expands | Dialogue stops | Sees other as enemy | Open hostility | Polarization |

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Extent of the Problem

- 85% of US workers experience conflict at work (National Institute of Health).

  - 33% of US workers expect workplace conflict to increase over the next year (SHRM 2024).

- 44% of US workers experience political disagreements at work (SHRM 2022 survey).

  - 25% of Americans say they avoid colleagues due to differing political views (Polarization Research Lab 2024 study).

- Destructive conflict can lead to acts of incivility at work, which costs organizations about $2 billion in reduced productivity and absenteeism (SHRM, 2024).

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Why Polarization Happens in the Workplace

- Societal polarization is increasingly seeping into the workplace.

- Information bubbles or echo chambers reinforce extreme positions.

- Employees tend to associate with others who have their same views (in-group bias).

- Negative stereotypes are attributed to the opposing group; opposing groups are demonized (out-group bias).

- Individuals seek out information that confirms their existing beliefs and reinforces their polarized views (confirmation bias).

- Employees feel their views are not valued; can become defensive and entrenched in their positions; trust is eroded.

- Team and organization leaders fail to provide clear guidelines for civil conversations.

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But Also Consider This…

- Individuals often experience a "perception gap" where they tend to overestimate negative beliefs and attitudes of the opposing group. This creates a sense of a greater division than exists.

- When opposing viewpoints are openly explored, individuals find they actually have more in common than they previously believed.

- Most employees desire a positive and respectful workplace.

- A majority of workers want a stable and productive work environment.

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Potential Costs and Benefits of Managing Polarization in the Workplace

Cost of Not Managing Polarization

- Erodes trust
- Decreases morale
- Problems not addressed
- Inhibits effective communication
- Valuable views not shared

Benefits of Managing Polarization

- Improves employee satisfaction and retention
- Creates a workplace culture that addresses opposing views constructively
- Increases employees' ability to management conflict
- Raises trust
- Enhances productivity

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## Strategies for Addressing Polarization

- Seven Exercises That Address Polarization
- What Leaders Can Do to Manage Polarization

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Conflict Can Be Constructive or Destructive

Definition: Conflict occurs when people's concerns, or the things they care about, appear to be incompatible.

Conflict can be either constructive or destructive depending on how it is handled.

Destructive conflict can lead to polarization in the workplace.
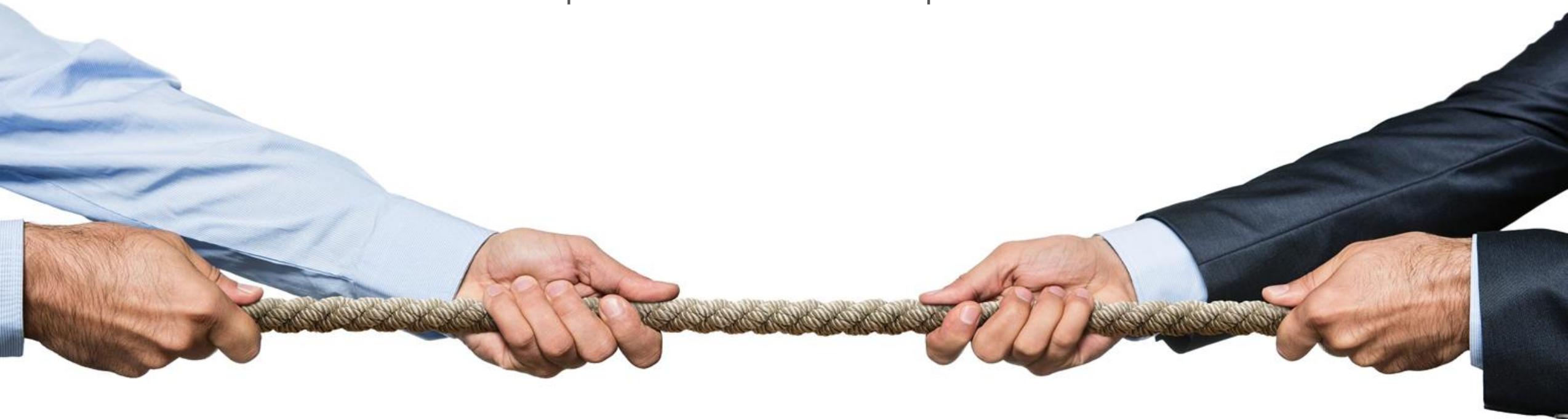
Source: Thomas, K.W. *Introduction to Conflict Management*, 2002

Importance of Conflict Management Skills for Employees

- Only 39% of employees are trained or coached to handle conflict.
  - 96% of those said the training/coaching helped them deal with conflict more effectively.
  - 73% said they felt more confident and comfortable engaging in disagreements.
  - 62% were able to turn potential destructive conflict into constructive conflict.

Source: Minson, J.A. and Gino, F. Managing a Polarized Workforce, 2022, HBR

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Individuals have conflict-handling preferences that are often unconscious and ineffective.

- A 2021 survey showed that nearly 60% described disagreements at work as moderately, very, or extremely unpleasant.

- More than 33% said they preferred to avoid disagreements.

- More than 40% thought conflicts were destructive to their professional relationships and productivity.

The Five TKI Conflict-Handling Modes

CONCERN FOR SELF

ASSERTIVENESS

ASSERTIVE

UNASSERTIVE

COMPETING

Assertive and uncooperative
Members try to satisfy their own concerns without regard for other teammates' concerns.

COLLABORATING

Assertive and cooperative
Members try to find a win-win solution that completely satisfies their own concerns as well as other teammates' concerns.

COMPROMISING

Intermediate in assertiveness and cooperativeness
Members try to find an acceptable agreement that only partially satisfies both their own concerns and those of other teammates.

AVOIDING

Unassertive and uncooperative
Members avoid dealing with the conflict issue without attempting to satisfy their own concerns or other teammates' concerns.

ACCOMMODATING

Unassertive and cooperative
Members attempt to satisfy other teammates' concerns without regard for their own.

UNCOOPERATIVE

COOPERATIVE

COOPERATIVENESS

CONCERN FOR OTHERS

Source: K. Thomas, *Introduction to Conflict Management*, 2002

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Those with polarized views often use the Competing mode.

Win-Lose Framing - Distributive dimension Competing approach seeks to win at all cost. Can cause distain, tension, and even hostility.

Win-Win Framing - Integrative dimension Collaborating seeks to develop solution that will address most of the stakeholders' needs.

Competing

Collaborating

Compromising

Avoiding

Accommodating

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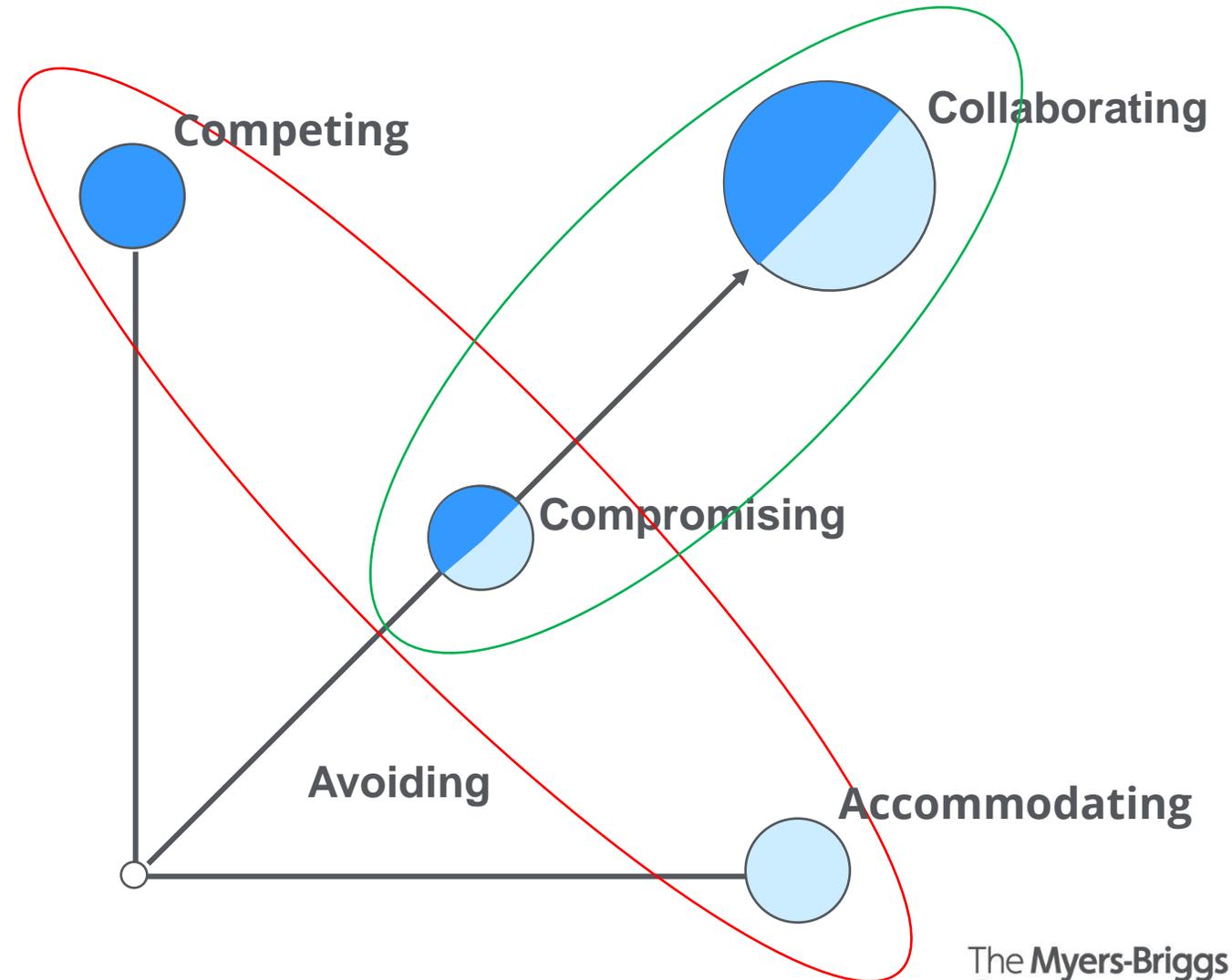
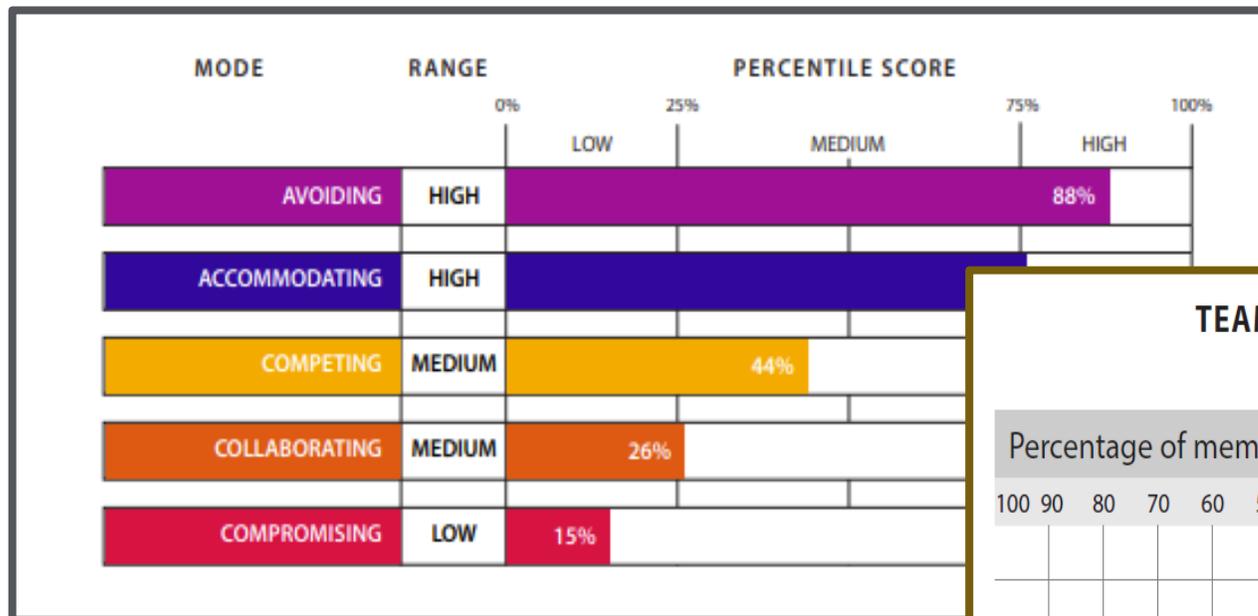# Polarized or competing views create undesirable risks.

Competing - Advantages	Collaborating - Advantages
Decisive	Requires identifying interests for both parties
Strong, focused point of view	Integrates interest of both parties
Defends position and interest at all cost	Can build trust
Can be very efficient if others accommodate	Often superior outcome
Competing - Disadvantages	**Collaborating - Disadvantages**
Decrease trust	Takes longer
Decrease credibility	Requires superior listening skills
Sabotage, retaliation	Necessitates open minds
Poor relationships	Requires creative problem solving

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How the TKI® Assessment Can Help Employees Understand and Handle Opposing Views
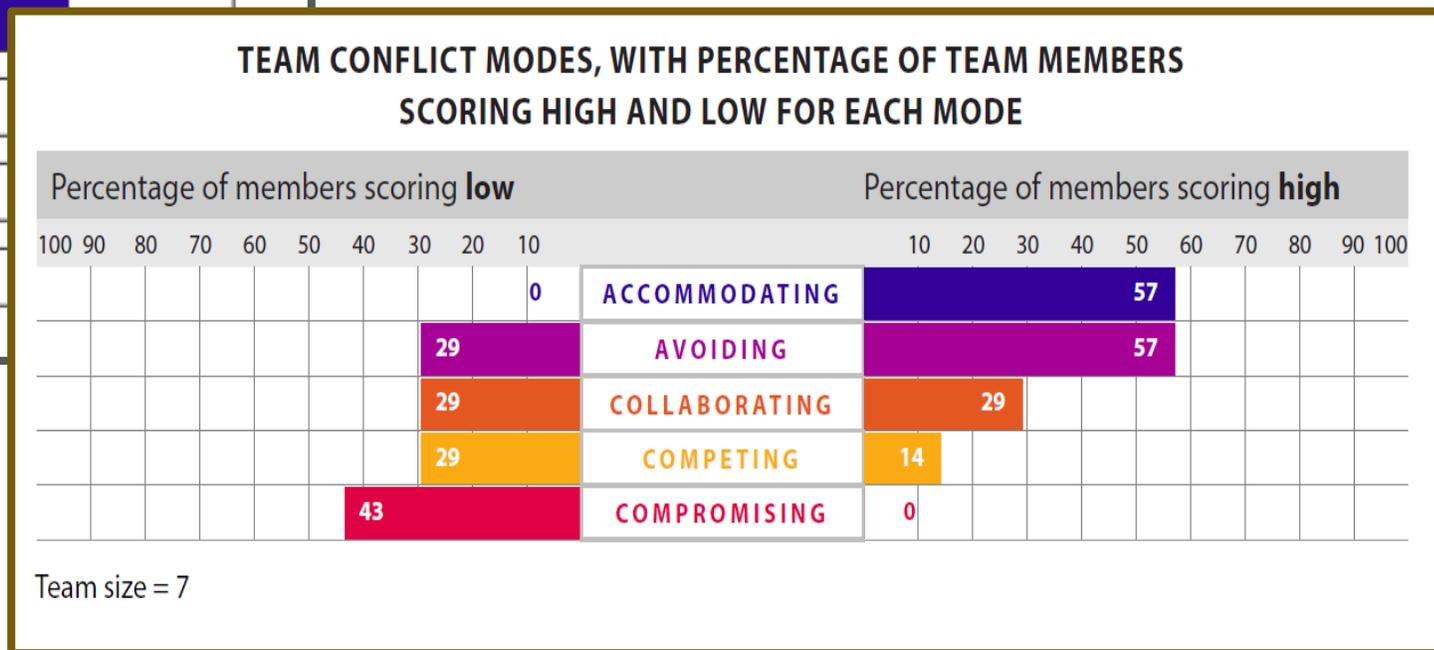
- Appreciate that differing viewpoints can be handled in a constructive manner.

- Know your own, and perhaps your team's, conflict-handling profile.

- Assess whether you are using a distributive framing and the consequences of that approach.

- Determine if it is possible to use a more integrative (collaborative) approach to the problem where both parties can have their needs met.

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The TKI® assessment identifies individual and/or team conflict-handling approaches.

Individual profile

MODE	RANGE	PERCENTILE SCORE
AVOIDING	HIGH	88%
ACCOMMODATING	HIGH	
COMPETING	MEDIUM	44%
COLLABORATING	MEDIUM	26%
COMPROMISING	LOW	15%

Team profile

TEAM CONFLICT MODES, WITH PERCENTAGE OF TEAM MEMBERS SCORING HIGH AND LOW FOR EACH MODE

Percentage of members scoring **low**		Percentage of members scoring **high**
ACCOMMODATING	0	57
AVOIDING	29	57
COLLABORATING	29	29
COMPETING	29	14
COMPROMISING	43	0

Team size = 7

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Exercise 1: Resolving Frozen Misperceptions

Purpose: Address frozen stereotypes and raise empathy for both parties.

Directions:

1. Each party makes three lists on poster papers.

   a. How I perceive the other

   b. How I perceive myself

   c. How I think the other party sees me

2. Share lists and ask clarifying questions for understanding (not judgment).

3. Discuss gaps and determine best conflict-handling mode to address the gaps.

Note: A more thorough explanation of the exercise can be found at <u>Resolving the Frozen Misperceptions Between Two Warring Parties - Kilmann Diagnostics</u>

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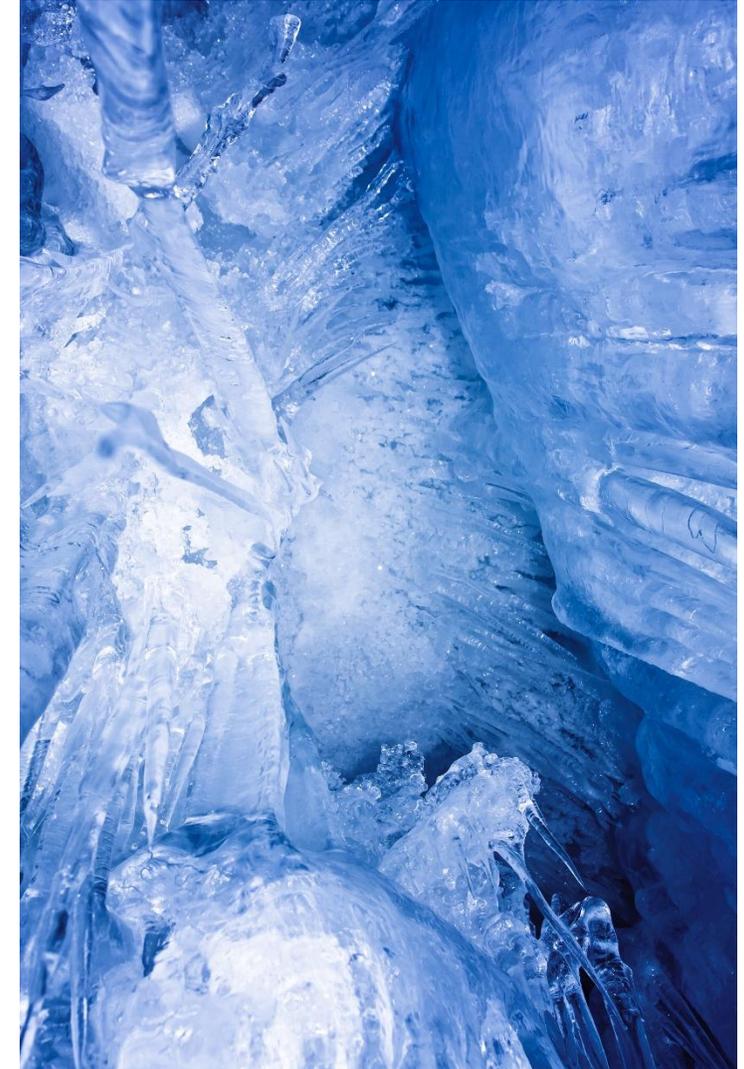
Exercise 2: Listening Triangle

1. Ask a real and powerful question.

2. Actively listen, in other words paraphrase and confirm that you got it right.

3. Re-ask. Don't move on to another topic. Shift your question just a little bit to dive one step deeper and help triangulate your understanding of the person's position.

1. ASK
RE-ASK
3. PARAPHRASE + CONFIRM
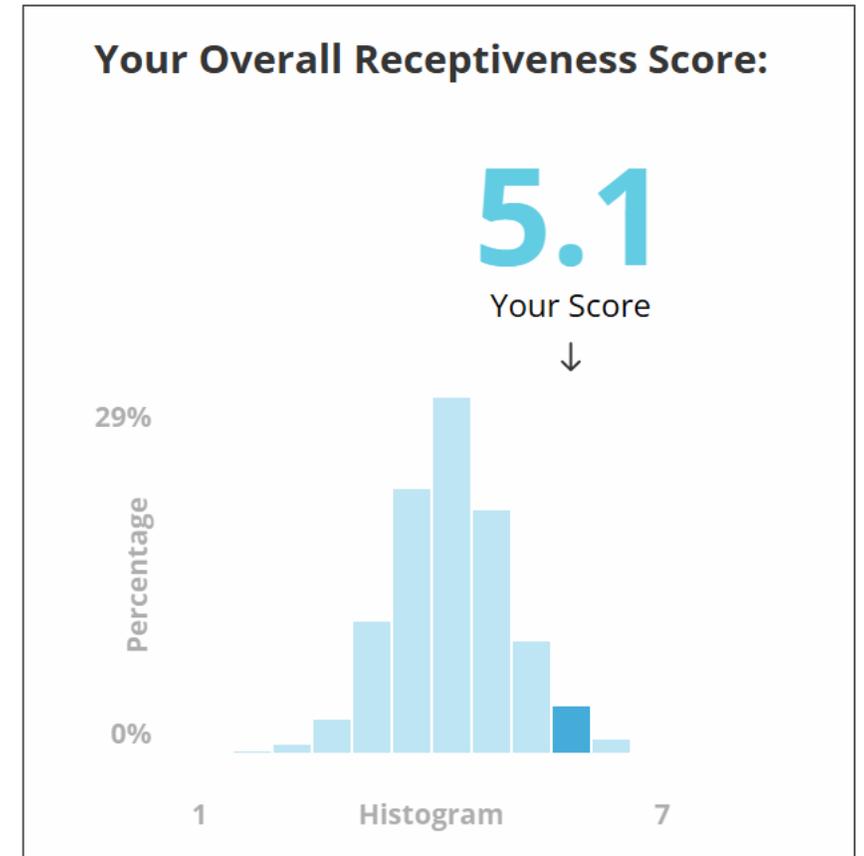2. LISTEN
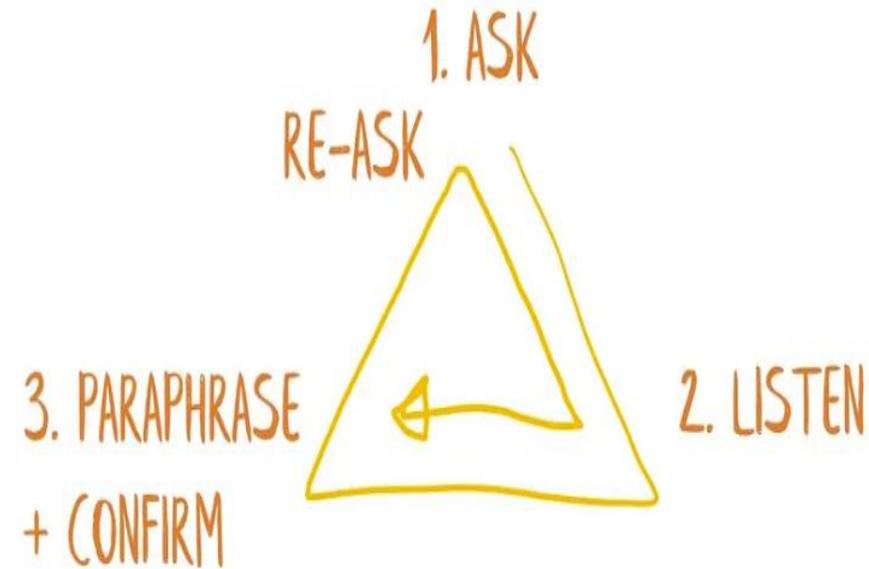
WWW.THECONVERSATIONFACTORY.COM

Sources: Managing in a Polarized World, *HBR* 2022
Pixar https://www.oscartrimboli.com/podcast/120/

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Exercise 3: Receptiveness Assessment

Receptive people:

- Are more willing to engage with information that opposes their beliefs on important, hot-button topics. For example, they might be more willing to read news or social media from the other side or have conversations with people they disagree with.

- Are more willing to think hard about the opposing perspective, instead of quickly dismissing it. This often leads to having a more favorable opinion of those on the other side and their arguments.

- May not be willing to change their mind or compromise. It simply means that they are ready to seriously consider the arguments on both sides of an issue.

Source: https://receptiveness.net/survey.html

Your Overall Receptiveness Score:

5.1
Your Score
↓

29%

Percentage

0%

1   Histogram   7

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Exercise 4: Conversation Receptiveness

1. Acknowledge others' point ("I understand that you believe").

2. Hedge your own claims (use "sometimes" and "often" to soften your assertions).

3. Do not contradict the other's view (acknowledge room for doubt to signal humility and recognize others' valid points).

4. Try to find the places of agreement with the other's point of view.

Source: Yeomans, et. al. Conversational Receptiveness, 2020, HBR.

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Exercise 5: Thank You, Because……

Purpose:

Create effective conversations about opposing views and finding common ground. This approach identifies and appreciates what you value or appreciate about hearing another's point of view.

Directions:

1. Thank the other and say what you value or appreciate about their point of view.

2. Follow with your own point of view. Looking for common ground.
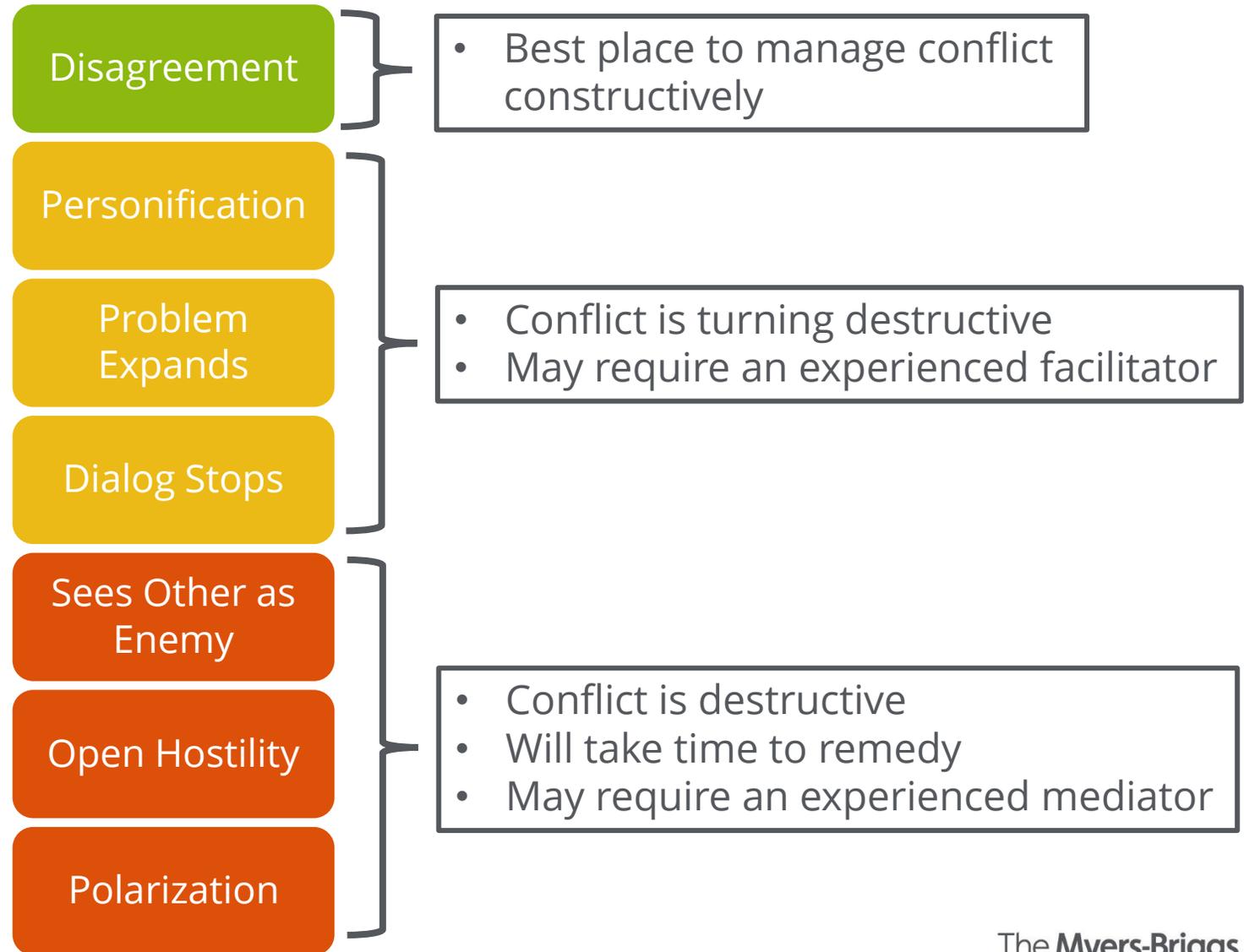

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Exercise 6: Try Building Consensus to Address Conflict

1. Get clear on the issue (e.g., return-to-office mandate).

2. Create space for all to share their interests, needs, and opinions.

3. Develop solutions including pros, cons, and criteria for making a decision.

4. Test for agreement (blocks, stand-asides, reservations, consensus).

5. Identify an action plan and process for adaptations as required.

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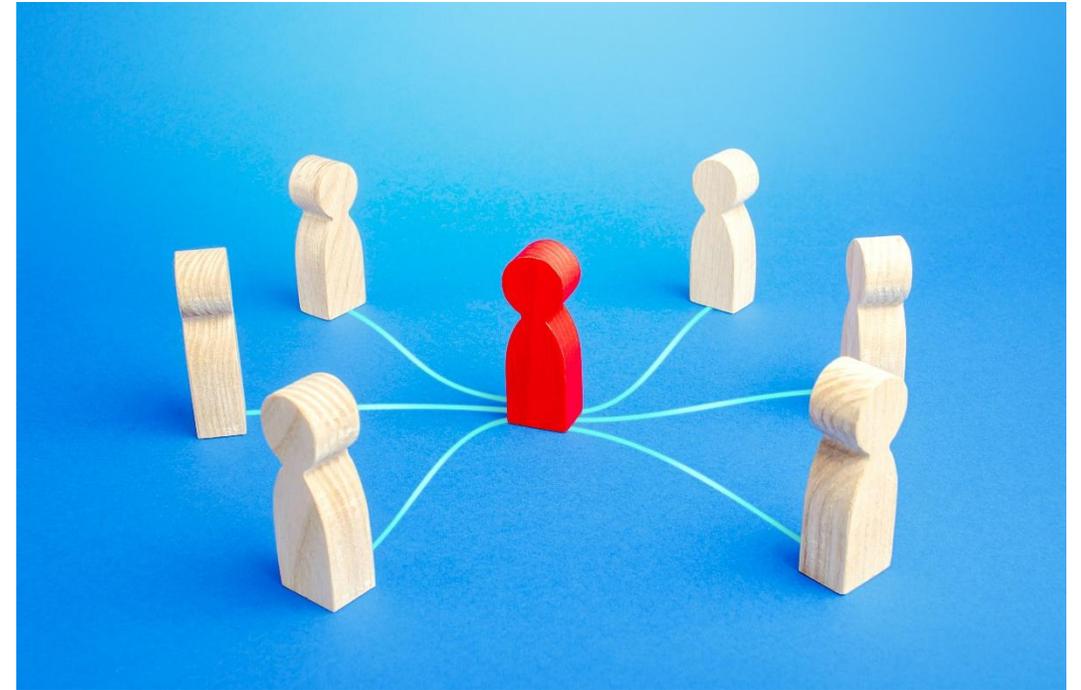
Exercise 7:
Use the Polarization Continuum to Diagnose and Address the Escalation of Workplace Conflict

Disagreement

- Best place to manage conflict constructively

Personification

Problem Expands

Dialog Stops

- Conflict is turning destructive
- May require an experienced facilitator

Sees Other as Enemy

Open Hostility

Polarization

- Conflict is destructive
- Will take time to remedy
- May require an experienced mediator

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How Organizational Leaders Can Create an Environment to Reduce Escalation and Promote Constructive Conversations

- Develop organizational norms of workplace civility.

- Map norms to organizational values.

- Communicate clear expectations for acceptable and unacceptable behaviors.

- Leaders should set the tone and model desired behavior.

- Establish HR and legal organizational policies that support constructive conversations.

- Some organizations have created structured spaces to address polarized topics.

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Podcast, Webinars, Team Conflict Assessment

Podcast:

Conflict management podcast with Dr. Gail Fann Thomas | The Myers-Briggs Company

Webinars:

Developing Teams Using the TKI Team Report

Rethinking Intergenerational Conflict at Work

Navigating Hard Conversations

TKI reports:

Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument Profile and Interpretive Report

Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument Team Report and Facilitator's Guide

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Suggested Reading

Cohen, T.R. et.al. (Aug 2020). The Art and Science of Disagreeing: How to Create More Effective Conversation About Opposing Views, *Academy of Management Proceedings*.

Edmondson, A.C. (2018). *The Fearless Organization: Creating Psychological Safety*. Wiley.

Edmondson, A.C. & Smith, D.M. (2006). Too hot to handle? How to manage relationship conflict. *California Management Review*, Fall, 6-31.

Health Action Alliance. (Sept 6, 2024). How to Talk About Politics in the Workplace.

Kilmann, R. (2023). *Mastering the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument.*

Monsour, J. et.al (2023). A new leadership challenge: Navigating political polarization in organizational team. *Business Horizons*, 66(6), 729-740.

Rosenberg, M. (2015). *Nonviolent Communication*: Tools for Healthy Relationships

Thomas, K.W. (2002). *Introduction to Conflict Management: Improving Performance Using the TKI*. The Myers-Briggs Company.

Yeomans, M., J. et.al. (Sept 2020). Conversational receptiveness: Expressing engagement with opposing views. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 131–148.

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Questions?

Thank you for attending.

Slides, recording, and other resources to follow.

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