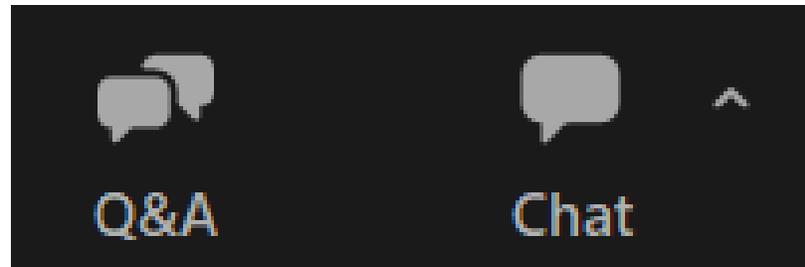# Psychological Safety: A Game Changer for Constructive Conflict Management

Presented by Gail Fann Thomas, EdD

July 8, 2025

The **Myers-Briggs** Company

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 (MBA) 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 address psychological safety at work?

A. I train, coach, facilitate, or consult with individuals or teams about building psychological safety.

B. I am a manager, CEO, or HR leader who approves or manages programs about addressing psychological safety.

C. We don't address psychological safety in the workplace.

D. Other (please specify in chat box)

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Agenda

Psychological Safety in the Workplace
- Importance of psychological safety
- Definition of psychological safety
- Measuring psychological safety
- 4 stages of psychological safety

Conflict Management
- Definition of conflict
- Thomas-Kilmann conflict model
- Measuring your conflict-handling preferences
- 3 types of conflict

Influence of Psychological Safety on Conflict Management
- Psychological safety and task conflict, process conflict, and interpersonal conflict
- Leader's role in creating and maintaining psychological safety

Practical Application
- Scenario
- Assessment of conflict modes and psychological safety
- Gap analysis
- SMART goals for action planning

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The Importance of Psychological Safety in the Workplace

- Research shows that psychological safety:
  - Is the most important factor for team success. (Google's Project Aristotle, 2012)
  - Is related to higher employee satisfaction (45% of participants) (Project Aristotle)
  - Generates 50% more innovative ideas (Harvard Business Review innovation report, 2023)
  - Engenders lower turnover rates (3% vs. 12%) (Boston Consulting Group, 2024)
  - Is related to motivation and happiness; 2.1 times more motivated; 2.7 times happier (BCG, 2024)
  - Is associated with better mental health (84% vs. 67%) (APA, 2024)

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Definition of Psychological Safety

- When people feel comfortable sharing concerns and mistakes without fear of embarrassment or retribution.

- They are confident that they can speak up and won't be humiliated, ignored, or blamed.

- They know they can ask questions when they are unsure about something.

- They tend to trust and respect their colleagues.

the **fearless** organization

Creating **Psychological Safety** in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation, and Growth

Amy C. Edmondson
HARVARD BUSINESS SCHOOL

WILEY

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What Psychological Safety is <u>Not</u>

- Eliminating or avoiding conflict

- Only focusing on group harmony

- Ignoring accountability

- Lacking attention on performance

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Measuring Psychological Safety

| Psychological safety | Learning behavior | Team performance |

1. If you make a mistake on this team, it is often held against you. (Reverse coded)

2. Members of this team are able to bring up problems and tough issues.

3. People on this team sometimes reject others for being different. (R)

4. It is safe to take a risk on this team.

5. It is difficult to ask other members of this team for help (R)

6. No one on this team would deliberately act in a way that undermines my efforts.

7. Working with members of this team, my unique skills and talents are valued and utilized.

Source: Edmondson, A. 1999, Psychological safety and learning behavior in work teams, *Administrative Science Quarterly* 44(20): 350-382.

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The Four Stages of Psychological Safety

Inclusion Safety

You feel accepted by the group. Differences are appreciated.

Learner Safety

You feel safe to engage in the discovery process, ask questions, and make mistakes.

Contributor Safety

You feel able to make contributions as an active full-fledged team member.

Challenger Safety

You believe you can challenge the status quo without retribution.

Source: Clark, T.R. *The Four Stages of Psychological Safety, 2020*

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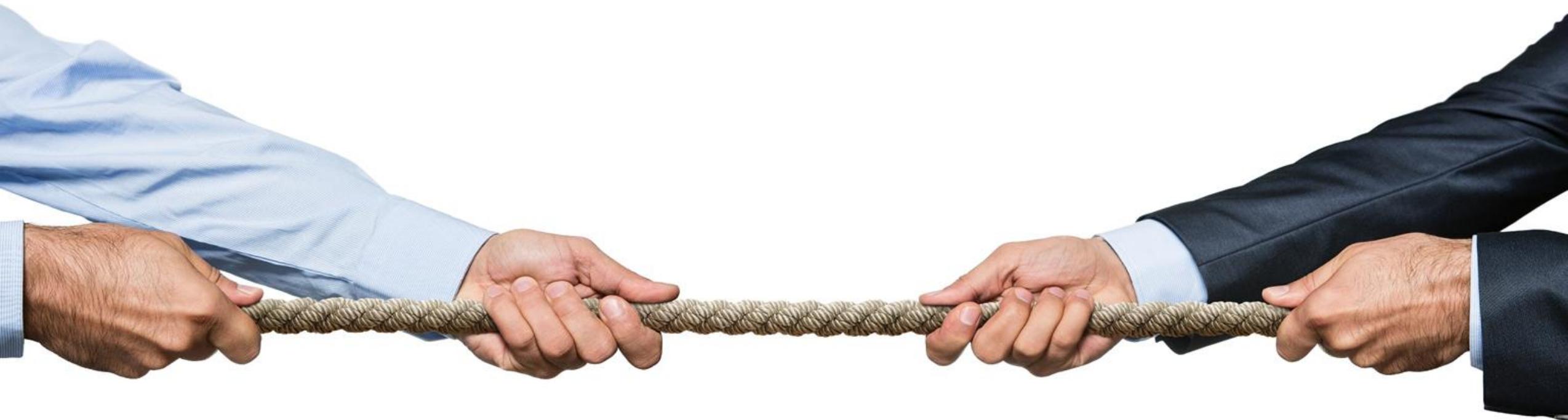
Source: Thomas, K.W. *Introduction to Conflict Management*, 2002

Individuals have conflict-handling preferences that are usually unconscious and can be ineffective.

- The Thomas-Kilmann conflict model focuses on dual concerns – concern for self and concern for others.

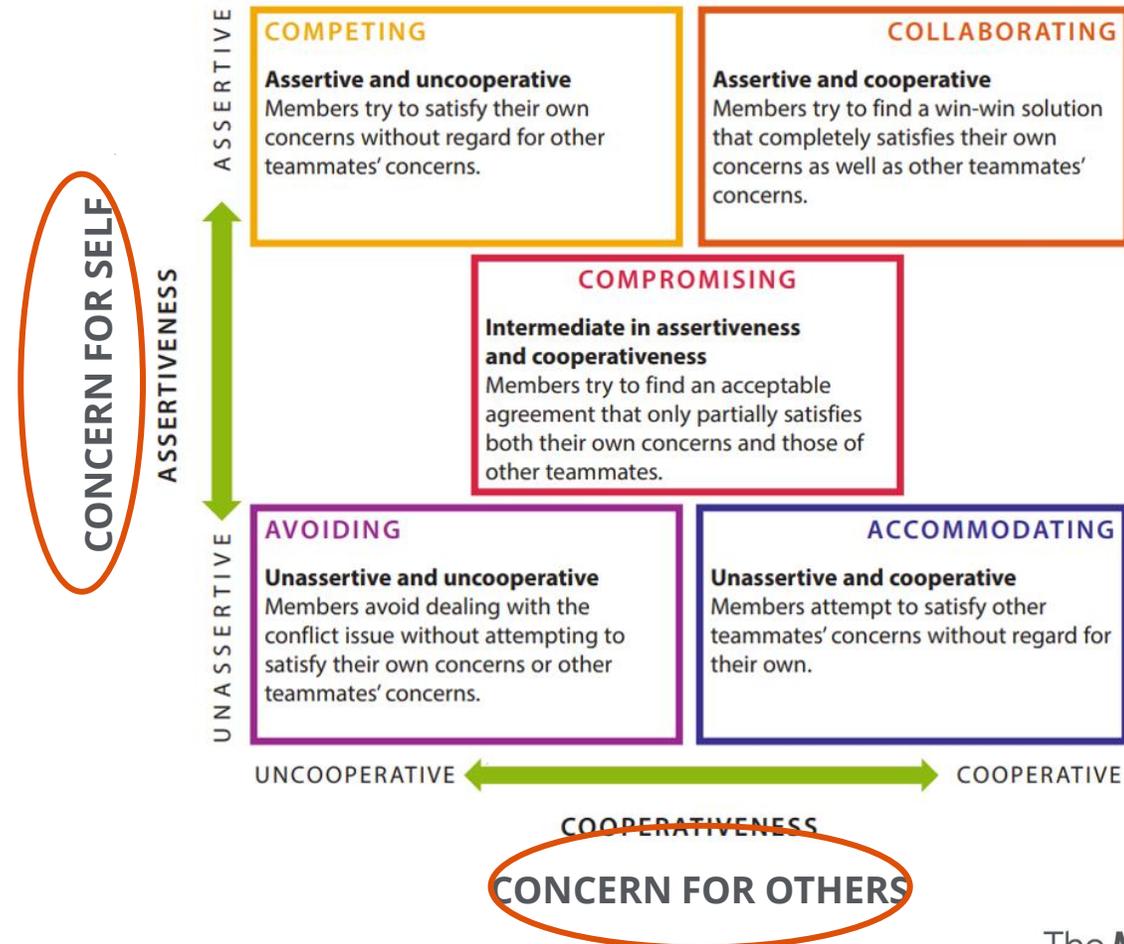- Each axis is on a continuum – assertiveness and cooperativeness.

- This 2X2 model provides the framework for the 5 conflict-handling modes.

- All modes are good but need to know when to use each mode for maximum effectiveness.

The Five TKI Conflict-Handling Modes

CONCERN FOR SELF

CONCERN FOR OTHERS

ASSERTIVE

ASSERTIVENESS

UNASSERTIVE

UNCOOPERATIVE — **COOPERATIVE**

COOPERATIVENESS

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.

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

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

Team size = 7

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The Three Types of Conflict

Task Conflict	Process Conflict	Relationship Conflict
Differing ideas or opinions about substantive issues	Disagreement about timing, roles, responsibilities, how things will be done	Incompatible feelings or emotions; clashes due to interpersonal issues

These three types of conflict can be related.
Use task conflict to maximize performance.
Mitigate the risk of process and relationship conflict.

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How psychological safety can make task conflict more constructive.

- Psychological safety encourages constructive disagreements about substantive issues (task conflict).

- Team members feel safe to speak up, challenge each other's ideas, and engage in rigorous problem solving.

- Leaders who create an open and respectful team climate support constructive discussions of differences.

Source: Bradley, et al. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 2011.

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How psychological safety can decrease process conflict.

- Team members who feel safe to express their opinions without retribution can engage in constructive conversations about team processes that will work best for all members and generate positive outcomes.

- When process issues are managed well, members are better able to engage in meaningful conversations about task-related conflict.

Source: Bradley, et al. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 2011.
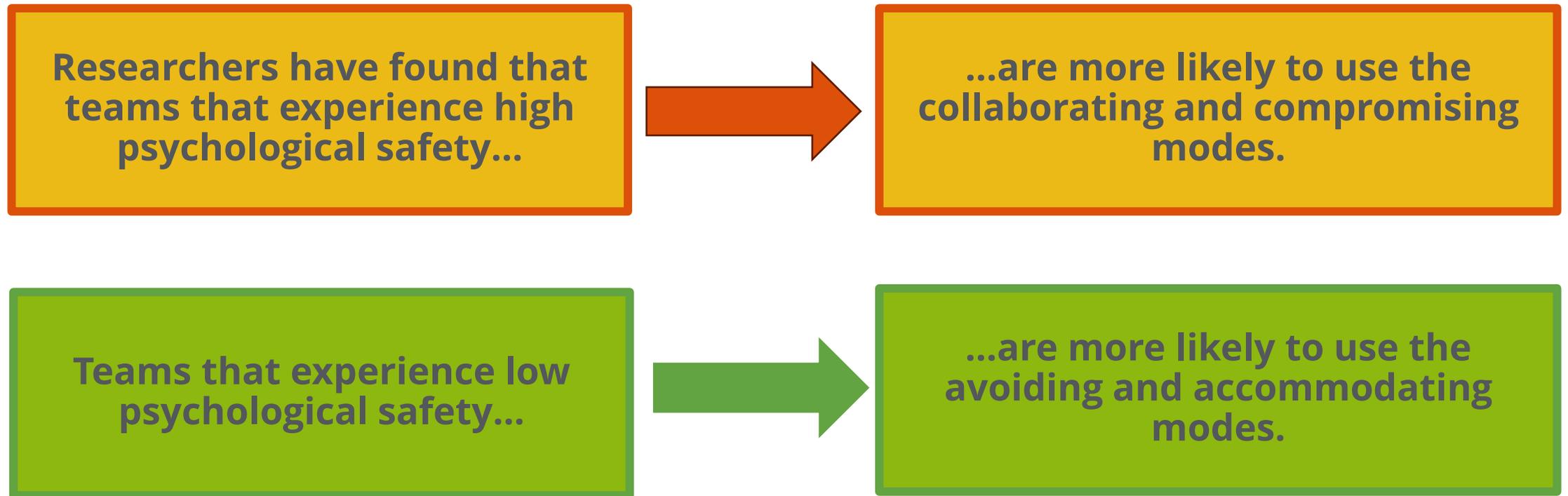

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How psychological safety can mitigate relationship conflict.

- In teams where psychological safety is high, individuals are more likely to constructively address personality differences and less likely to experience destructive relationship conflict.

- When team members feel comfortable debating issues related to the task, they are less likely to take disagreements personally.

Source: Bradley, et al. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 2011.

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Relationship between psychological safety and TKI® conflict-handling modes

Researchers have found that teams that experience high psychological safety...

→

...are more likely to use the collaborating and compromising modes.

Teams that experience low psychological safety...

→

...are more likely to use the avoiding and accommodating modes.

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Leaders have a profound influence on the level of psychological safety.

Leadership Behaviors

- Create processes that allow team members to bring up problems and tough issues.

- Make sure everyone is aware of one another's unique skills and talents and actively draw on those to improve problem solving.

- Make it safe for team members to take risks.

- Identify productive ways to learn from mistakes.

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Leadership Behaviors that Hinder or Enable

Behaviors that can hinder psychological safety

- Condemnation
- Putting people down
- Interrupting others
- Judgmental stance
- Avoiding challenging conversations
- Righteousness
- Talking over others
- Focusing on favored members

Behaviors that can enable psychological safety

- Appreciating members' ideas
- Making time for everyone to share ideas
- Modeling vulnerability and fallibility
- Sharing stories about risk taking
- Open information sharing
- Listening with intent to understand
- Allowing everyone to raise issues
- Demonstrating curiosity by asking questions
- Showing you don't have all the answers

Source: Various research studies

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Leaders can tailor their approach to creating psychological safety using MBTI® insights.

Example:

For ENTP members

- Encourage healthy debate.
- Value diverse opinions.
- Model curiosity.
- Build trust by following through on commitments and promises.

For ISFJ team members

- Show empathy.
- Encourage quieter voices.
- Help with tasks when needed.
- Reassure that they can share concerns.
- Offer a warm and nonjudgmental approach.

➢ See Roger Pearman's, *Develop Psychological Safety Through Personality Type, 2025*

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NEWTECH Organization and the NEXUS Team

- NEWTECH is a large public sector organization with 2,000 scientists, engineers, and other staff members in 23 departments.

- Its mission is to produce cutting-edge technology for IT security purposes.

- The NEXUS team is a 7-member team that focuses on the development of a specific proprietary technology. Their work requires input from several other departments within the organization. The NEXUS team's output is also fed to numerous departments.

- Technology is changing rapidly for this organization. The organization's competitive edge depends on its ability to stay abreast of the very latest in cyber threats, vulnerabilities, and relevant technologies.

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The NEXUS Team Dilemma

- Geopolitical shifts and tighter budgets are creating new priorities for NEWTECH, and the NEXUS Team must make some major shifts in their work.

- The NEXUS team members get along with each other well, but they are not able to meet their agency's current requirements.

- Top management has directed the NEXUS's team leader to improve the team's performance otherwise the leader and other team members may need to be replaced.

- Cary Shell, an L&D consultant, has been asked to work with the NEXUS team to improve their performance.

- Her needs analysis began with interviews with top management , the NEXUS team leader, and NEXUS individual team members.

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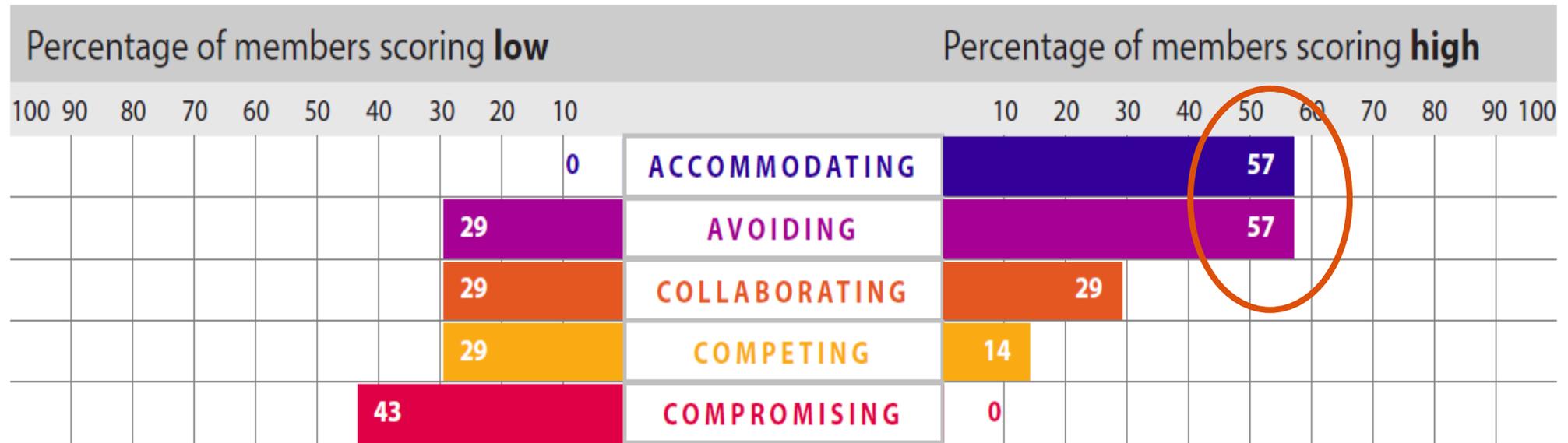
Summary of Interviews with Team NEXUS

- The team members have worked together for more than ten years and really enjoy working with one another. They are friends as well as work colleagues.

- Very little conflict surfaces among the team.

- No one wants to "rock the boat" among team members and with the team leader.

- Their strong focus on harmony has made it difficult for them to openly and honestly discuss substantive issues that might improve their problem-solving capabilities.

- Team members are aware of some pressure from upper management but are happy that their team leader shields them from "unreasonable" demands.

- Cary suspects low psychological safety is not allowing them to share different perspectives and tackle tough problems.

- Initial interviews indicate that the team needs some work in conflict management to improve their ability to surface differing perspectives, collaborate and problem-solve.

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NEXUS Team Development Program

- Preparation: Administer TKI and Psychological Safety assessments to NEXUS team members.

- Session 1: Introduce conflict-handling model and interpret team conflict-handling profile.

- Session 2: Review and interpret psychological safety results.

- Session 3: Identify gaps between current situation and desired future.

- Session 4: Monitor progress with 12-month action-oriented SMART goals.

- Optional: team coaching and/or individual coaching sessions with team leader and selected team members.
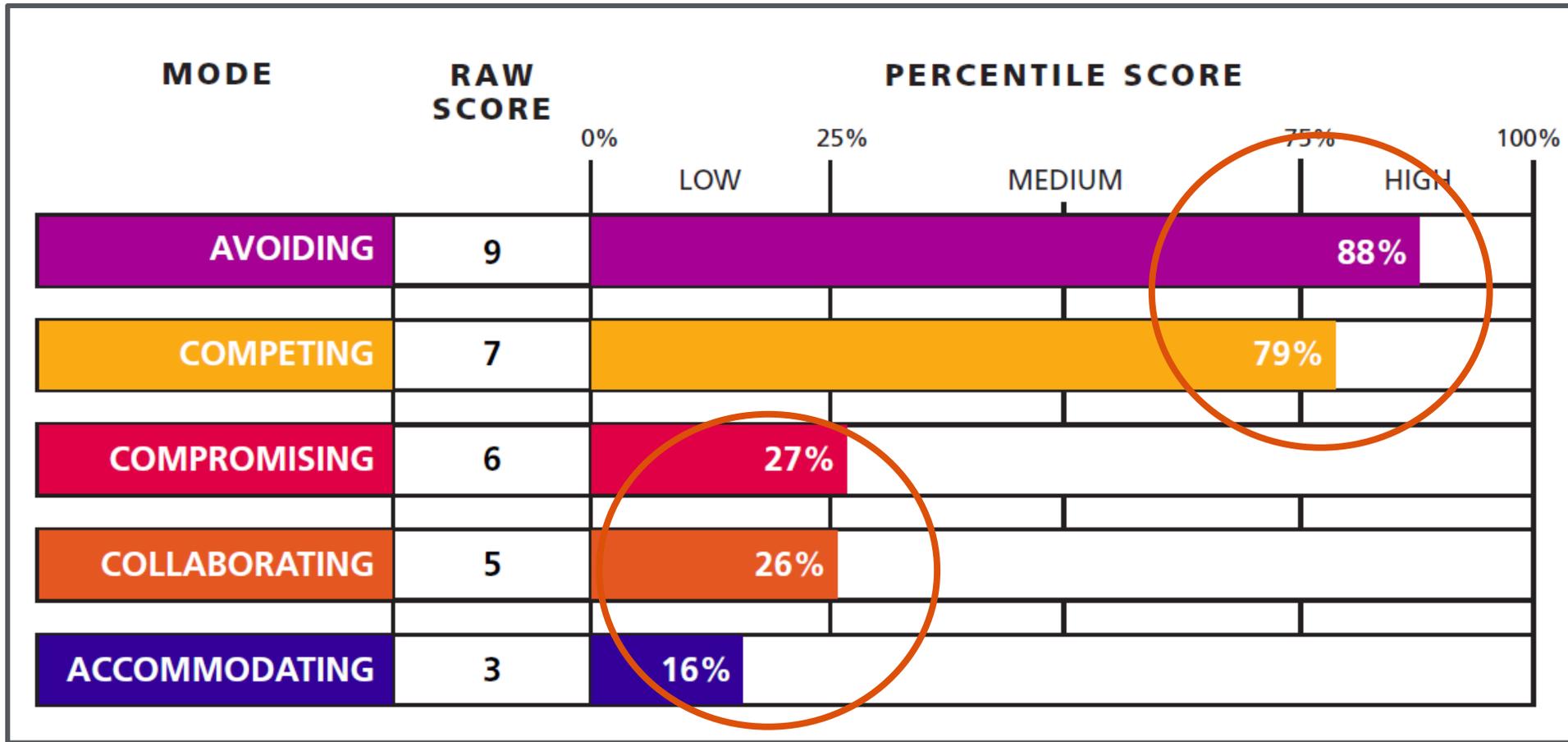
Session 1: NEXUS TKI® Team Report

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**
0	ACCOMMODATING	57
29	AVOIDING	57
29	COLLABORATING	29
29	COMPETING	14
43	COMPROMISING	0

Team size = 7

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Session 1: TKI® Individual Conflict-handling Profile – Team Leader

MODE	RAW SCORE	PERCENTILE SCORE			
		LOW	MEDIUM	HIGH	
AVOIDING	9			88%	
COMPETING	7			79%	
COMPROMISING	6	27%			
COLLABORATING	5	26%			
ACCOMMODATING	3	16%			

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Session 1: Advantages and Disadvantages of Team NEXUS' Conflict-Handling Preferences

HIGH AND LOW MODES	Advantages	Disadvantages
High on Avoiding	We all seem to get along. Very few disagreements. No controversy.	Unassertive. We don't address the hard issues. No controversy.
High on Accommodating	Meetings seem efficient. Harmony is a team norm.	Unassertive. Several members often give in to the high competing members without stating their concerns. Harmony is a team norm.
Low on Competing	We don't waste time arguing.	We don't have honest conversations about our concerns.
Mid-range on Collaborating and Compromising	We have some skill in collaboration and compromising.	Collaboration seems key to our team issues. We don't seem to collaborate as a team; only a few individuals. We don't know when to collaborate vs. compromise.

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Session 1: Analysis of Types of Conflict Within the Team

Type of Conflict	Current Situation	Ways We Might Improve
Process	Leader decides on process. We rarely discuss process issues.	Discuss process issues at the beginning of the project and do regular check ins to see if we need adjustments (options, pros, cons)
Interpersonal	We all seem to get along because we rarely discuss our differences. Everyone is polite, but we often don't perform well.	We need to develop our capability in constructive task conflict but watch for ways that interpersonal conflict might arise and learn how to deal with it.
Task	Leader directs and usually decides. We rarely discuss options, pros, and cons. No discussion of lessons learned.	Leader learn to engage team in more rigorous problem solving, surface different perspectives, and devise solutions that meet current requirements in a timely fashion.

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Session 2: Psychological Safety Results

Q	Individuals	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Mean	SD
5	It is difficult to ask other members of this team for help. (R)	4	4	3	4	4	3	4	3.71	0.49
6	No one on this team would deliberately act in a way that undermines my efforts.	2	2	4	5	4	3	4	3.43	1.13
3	People on this team sometimes reject others for being different. (R)	1	2	4	3	4	4	4	3.14	1.21
1	If you make a mistake on this team, it is often held against you. (R)	3	3	2	4	2	3	5	3.14	1.07
4	It is safe to take a risk on this team.	1	2	4	4	1	2	5	2.71	1.60
7	Working with members of this team, my unique skills and talents are valued and utilized.	1	1	2	4	2	2	5	2.43	1.51
2	Members of this team are able to bring up problems and tough issues.	1	2	2	2	1	4	4	2.29	1.25
	Total Score	13	16	21	26	18	21	31		

Highest scores

Lowest scores
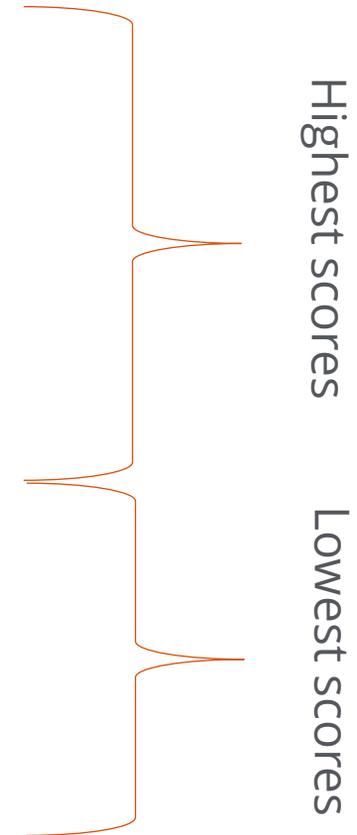
1=Strongly disagree; 5 = Strongly agree

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Session 2: Observations from the Psychological Safety Results

- Averages range from 2.29 to 3.71/5.0.

- Highest individual score possible is 35. Individual scores range from 13-31. Member 7 is experiencing the highest psychological safety. Member 1 is experiencing the least amount of psychological safety. Varying opinions on Q4, 7, and 2. (Highest standard deviations)

- The team believes that some scores could be the result of avoiding and accommodating.

- First 4 items might be a result of the team's harmony.

- The final three items could be due to lack of discussion around the substantive issues.

Session 3: Gap Analysis

Current Situation

- May be overusing accommodating and avoiding.

- Not taking advantage of constructive conflict management (e.g. ability to surface differences and manage conflict well).

- High on some element of psychological safety, but low on others that may be related to inability to raise diverse opinions.

- Too reliant on team leader.

Desired Future State

- We're able to collaborate better within the team, with top management, and with peer departments.

- We are purposeful in how we handle conflict.

- We are able to maintain high levels of psychological safety that supports our conflict handling capability.

- We know how to give and receive constructive feedback that supports conflict management and psychological safety.

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Session 4: SMART Goals – 12 months

Specific	Measurable	Achievable	Relevant	Time-bound
Purposeful in how we handle conflict.	Members able to use each mode appropriately	Members receive continuous feedback to strengthen skill	Constructive conflict management requires appropriate use of each mode	Week 40
Maintain high levels of psychological safety that supports our conflict handling capability	Conduct end-of-year PS survey	Discuss results, what has worked, what still needs improvement	High level of psychological safety will support constructive conflict management	Week 44
Know how to give and receive constructive feedback that supports conflict management and psychological safety	Members regularly give and receive constructive feedback	Regular monitoring and additional training if needed	Constructive, honest, respective feedback is key to PS and CM	Week 48
Collaborate better within the team, with top management, and with peer departments	Positive responses to 360-degree collaboration survey	Team executes improvement plan as specified in SMART goals	Collaborative skills are key good relationships and performance upward and across the organization	Week 50

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Session 4: SMART Goals – 3 months

Specific	Measurable	Achievable	Relevant	Time-bound
Team will get clarity on project goals	All members can clearly articulate goals	Open discussion, questions about goals surfaced and answered	Focus on goals is imperative for accountability	Week 1 Revisit quarterly
Develop norms that will support PS and CM	Observe instances of behavior that supports norms	Have team develop norms that they can all live by	Norms will keep members on track throughout the project	Week 1
Leader improves ability to influence PS and CM	Survey shows leader improvement	Individual coaching sessions for the leader	Leader plays a key role in developing and shaping PS and CM	Week 2
Improve frequency and quality of feedback	Track the number of constructive feedback exchanges	Provide training session on giving and receiving feedback	Constructive feedback is crucial to shape and maintain new behaviors	Week 4
Identify and employ each members unique talents, skills, personality type	Number of times members use available set of skills, talents, and adapts to type.	Each member takes MBTI and has discusses how to best communicate with one another.	Acknowledging individual differences are key to building psychological safety and managing conflict constructively	Week 8
Improve ability to collaborate within our team	Observe times that the team discusses need and process for collaboration	Provide training, real-time facilitation, and individual coaching to improve collaboration among members	Constructive conflict management requires the use of effective collaboration	Week 12

Session 4: SMART Goals – 6 months

Specific	Measurable	Achievable	Relevant	Time-bound
Purposefully manage the three types of conflict	Identify times when process and interpersonal conflict are mitigated	Discuss ways to mitigate process conflict; periodically do process checks	Diminished process and interpersonal conflict is needed for constructive conflict management	Week 13
Make it safe for team members to take risks	# of stories shared about risks they have taken	Discuss process for surfacing risks and ways to learn from it	High psychological safety should make it easier to take risks	Week 17
Continue leader's ability to support PS and CM	Members provide observations of positive leader support – see leader behavior checklist; MBTI specific behaviors	Team discussion about leader's support for PS and CM – what's working, need more of, less of	Leader need continuous improvement to support team's PS and CM	Week 19
Check improvement of psychological safety	Readminister PS survey	Discuss survey results, identify ways to improve and maintain PS	Period checks on PS will help monitor progress	Week 24

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Coaching for Team NEXUS Leader

- Need to involve team more in decision making.
  - Protective strategy may be comfortable for the team but not be working to achieve organizational goals. May be stifling leadership development of team members.

- Build team's collaborative capability.
  - Train, model, and encourage team members to use a problem-solving process that identifies and integrates own concerns and others' concerns

- Create more psychological safety within the team.
  - Focus on items that scored the lowest in the survey.
  - Take steps to improve and find ways to maintain psychological safety over time (e.g. create processes that allow team members to bring up problems and tough issues; make it safe for team members to take risks; identify productive ways to learn from mistakes).
  - Assist team in developing new norms that support psychological safety.

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Wrap Up

- Psychological safety is key to successful teams —where people feel safe to speak up, take risks, and engage in honest dialogue.

- When psychological safety is high, teams are more likely to engage in constructive task conflict, where members can productively share different perspectives on important issues while minimizing destructive process and relationship conflict that can derail a team.

- The TKI® assessment along with the other tools and resources presented today can be used in a variety of settings at all levels; for example, teaching classes, delivering corporate training, developing teams, and coaching.

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Questions?

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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](#)

[Managing Conflict for Three Types of Teams](#)

[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

American Psychological Association, (2024). *Psychological Safety in the Changing Workplace.*

Boston Consulting Group (2024). *Psychological Safety Levels the Playing Field for Employees.*

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Thank you for attending.

Slides, recording, and other resources to follow.

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