**Session Title**: Win, Lose, or Collaborate: Revisiting Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Handling Modes Using Competition Based Learning

**Abstract**: Games promote pathways to experiential learning in the classroom. This simple card game aims to help students understand the importance of collaboration through the lens of the Thomas-Kilmann Five Conflict Handling Modes model. Using a 15-minute teamwork related game, students are challenged to work through interteam and intrateam conflict while experiencing the five conflict modes cited in Thomas and Kilmann’s seminal work on conflict management. Classroom discussion and interpersonal reflection is explored following the teamwork exercise.

**Keywords**: Conflict Management, Organizational Behavior, Competition Based Learning

The purpose of this classroom-based game is to promote a better understanding of how collaboration can lead to win-win scenarios. Thomas and Kilmann promoted five modes to explain conflict handling behavior: competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding, and accommodating (Kilmann & Thomas, 1975). Hence, based upon the original work of Blake, Mouton, & Bidwell (1962), they postulated these interpersonal conflict behaviors occur on dimensions of assertiveness and cooperation. Cooperation is the extent to which people satisfy another person’s concerns, while assertiveness is the extent to which people satisfy their own concerns. Moreover, they noted that competing is assertive and lacks cooperation, while compromise shares moderate elements of cooperation and assertiveness, yet requires parties to yield full satisfaction. However, collaboration is highly assertive and demonstrates cooperativeness as an integrative dimension of mutual satisfaction (Kilmann & Thomas, 1977).

The goal of this experiential session enables students to interact in a game-based scenario to understand the importance of interteam and intrateam collaboration. Interteam conflict relates to how an internal team cooperates given its own resources, whereas intrateam conflict relates to teams within an organization and how they relate to one another with regard to cooperation and exchange of resources (van Bunderen, Greer, & van Knippenberg, 2017).

Using a deck of 52 playing cards cut into fourths (208 triangle pieces), teams are ideally separated into four groups and given 52 pieces of cards randomly separated into four envelopes. The teams have three minutes time to collaborate and strategize about how they will allocate their (interteam) resources to assemble as many complete cards as possible. After three minutes, the teams are permitted to barter and trade with the other teams (intrateam) for eight minutes. The team that assembles the most complete cards wins the game.

**Theoretical Foundation and Teaching Implications**

Achieving high levels of collaboration requires a willingness to share information, cooperate, and conduct interactive engagement (Ashkenas, 2015). While the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Handling Modes instrument has been supported in scholarly research and private enterprise (Rahim, 1983), it is somewhat challenging to operationalize in a classroom lecture-style discussion. Thus, combining competition based game learning and classic learning techniques has shown to improve student learning outcomes (Burguillo, 2010).

Employing this simple card game activates the student’s competitive drive and often results in better awareness for the essential elements of teamwork and collaboration articulated in the Thomas-Kilmann model. This pedagogical approach has been conducted approximately six times in undergraduate and graduate classroom environments, as well as, third party facilitation within professional settings to deepen the understanding of how collaboration results in more satisfactory organizational outcomes (Ben Wilhelm, personal communication, December 2018). Typically, the Thomas-Kilmann model has been introduced following the game experience to promote dialogue and interpersonal reflection. Refer to (see Appendix A for The Five Conflict Handling Modes).

The five conflict modes include the following behaviors:

1. Competing – assertive with low cooperation; power is important driver (win/lose scenario)
2. Collaborating – includes high levels of assertiveness and cooperation to balance needs of others, as well as, own needs (win/win scenario)
3. Compromising – an intermediate state that requires some assertiveness and cooperation, yet both parties concede something (lose/lose scenario)
4. Avoiding – non-cooperative and unassertive, which displays withdrawal
5. Accommodating – unassertive, yet cooperative; neglects own personal needs and defers to others (Thomas & Kilmann, 2008)

Kolb suggests that experiential learning is not fixed and is a product of thoughts being formed and re-formed (Kolb, 1984). Integrating Thomas-Kilmann’s five modes of conflict within a game context offers a novel approach to applying theory to practice. Inevitably, all five modes of handling conflict emanate in a teamwork environment. Thus, students exploring organizational behavior approaches to negotiation, conflict, team building, and power dynamics stand to gain strong insights from this experience. Facilitating this simple game in a classroom environment enables students to learn and understand collaboration at a deeper level.

**Learning Objectives**

**Interpersonal communication** to engage in ideas, alignment of goals, roles, and responsibilities

**Conflict management and negotiation** to demonstrate behavior styles and experience power dynamics with time and resource constraints

**Collaboration and collective teamwork** to wield influence and balance personal needs with the needs of others to achieve interteam and intrateam goals

**Session Description**

It is envisioned to incorporate this conference theme track session as a classroom exercise with MOBTS participants. In my experience, the game manifests a lot of excitement and dialogue from a group dynamics perspective; linking the exercise to the Thomas-Kilmann model crystallizes the learning and resonates as an important consideration for working collaboratively with teams at school and in the workplace. Therefore, it seems to fit with the theme: Teaching Agents for Positive Change. While the actual exercise takes approximately 15 minutes, the lesson and discussion typically require 45 minutes to one hour to complete.

**Exercise Overview**

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| Instructions (Total Time = 45-60 minutes) | |
| Setup | * Using a 52-standard playing card deck, cut each card in half diagonally, then in half again diagonally, so there are four triangle pieces per card. Cut each card in the entire deck * Mix all pieces together and divide out 52 pieces into four envelopes (208 pieces total) * Divide participants into four groups of relatively equal size (requires 4, upto 30 participants) |
| Directions to Participants | * **DO NOT OPEN ENVELOPES UNTIL OFFICIAL START!** * Provide an envelope to each team and indicate that each team has 52 pieces of a playing card deck that has been cut into fourths (each team has an equal amount of card pieces) * **GOAL**: The team that assembles the most complete cards wins the game (i.e. king of hearts is an example of a complete card) |
| Total Time | * Each team has three minutes to sort pierces, determine what they need to complete their cards, and develop a bartering strategy * After three minutes, let everyone know they can barter with other teams individually or collectively to obtain additional cards. They have approximately eight minutes to trade with others before time expires on the exercise. Provide periodic updates on timing to increase the sense of urgency |
| Final Tally | * When time is up, ask each team to report their completed cards and conduct debriefing/lesson |
| Debriefing | * Conduct an interactive discussion and group reflection |
| Lesson on Collaboration | * Introduce Thomas-Kilmann Five Conflict Modes model for linking the exercise with collaboration. |

#### Retrieved from: http://www.ventureteambuilding.co.uk/mix-n-match-cards-team-building-activity/

**Questions for Participants**

What was your strategy for winning? (focus on the team that won and inquire into what worked well/prompt others to share what work well)

What was frustrating and challenging about working with your team and bartering with other teams?

When you think about your role on your team, where did you fit? (leader, follower, loner, changing roles)

To what extent did you cooperate with other teams to get what you both wanted?

How did the element of time and team organization influence your outcomes and behaviors?

If you had it to do over again, what would you do differently?

**Instructional Notes**

When presenting the five modes of the Thomas-Kilmann model, it is instructive to walk through a definition of each mode

Ask where competing, compromising, and collaborating showed up for them upon reviewing the slide

As the instructor, it is insightful to share where you witnessed different behaviors being exhibited throughout the exercise for clarity

**Win-Win Outcome**

Given four teams, there is a way for everyone to assemble 13 cards each (each team focuses on completing one of the four suits of cards). This revelation is a very powerful understanding of collaboration because everyone collectively wins. Often someone in the group articulates this opportunity for a win-win scenario, but rarely will anyone listen to this insight in a collective group. This may be a result of unconscious bias because we are often inspired to promote win-lose outcomes, so we overlook the opportunity for all teams to win together.

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Appendix A

