

## JOHNSON AND JOHNSON'S FIVE CONFLICT POSITIONS

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Other experts in conflict resolution use animal analogies to describe the five conflict positions.

Understanding your own conflict style is important especially when you are in the position where you are helping children/youth identify and understand their preferred conflict style.

Johnson and Johnson outline five conflict positions plotted along an assertiveness and a cooperativeness scale<sup>11</sup>.



The shark symbolizes **'forcing'**



The owl symbolizes **'collaborating/confronting'**



The teddy bear symbolizes **'smoothing'**



The turtle symbolizes **'withdrawing'**



The giraffe symbolizes **'compromising'**

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<sup>11</sup> Johnson, D.W., & Johnson, F.P. (1994). *Joining Together: Group Theory and Group Skills*. Essex, UK: Pearson Education Ltd.

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## SELF-ASSESSMENT ACTIVITY: HOW DO YOU REACT WHEN YOU ARE FACED WITH A CONFLICT?

Try the questionnaire entitled: “**How to Act in a Conflict**” by Johnson & Johnson<sup>12</sup> and score your responses. Use a blank questionnaire available at the end of the module to write down your answers.

Your overall response will give you an introductory glimpse into your own preferred strategy or strategies of reacting to any conflict.

Refer to the *Conflict Mode Instrument* which is listed in the Recommended Web Resources found at the end of this module.

### How I Act in a Conflict – Questionnaire<sup>13</sup>

The proverbs listed below can be thought of as descriptions of some of the different strategies for resolving conflicts. Proverbs state traditional wisdom and they reflect traditional ways of resolving conflicts. Read each of the proverbs carefully. **Using the following scale, indicate how typical each proverb is of your actions in a conflict.**

5 = very often the way I act in a conflict

4 = frequently the way I act in a conflict

3 = sometimes the way I act in a conflict

2 = seldom the way I act in a conflict

1 = never the way I act in a conflict

- \_\_\_ 1. It is easier to refrain than to retreat from a quarrel.
- \_\_\_ 2. If you cannot make a person think as you do, make him or her do as you think.
- \_\_\_ 3. Soft words win hard hearts.
- \_\_\_ 4. You scratch my back, I'll scratch yours.
- \_\_\_ 5. Come now and let us reason together.
- \_\_\_ 6. When two quarrel, the person who keeps silent first is the most praiseworthy.
- \_\_\_ 7. Might overcomes right.
- \_\_\_ 8. Smooth words make smooth ways.
- \_\_\_ 9. Better half a load than no bread at all.

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<sup>12</sup> Johnson, D.W., & Johnson, F.P. (1994). *Joining Together: Group Theory and Group Skills*. Essex, UK: Pearson Education Ltd.

<sup>13</sup> The full section below is taken verbatim from Johnson, D.W., & Johnson, F.P. (1994). *Joining Together: Group Theory and Group Skills*. Essex, UK: Pearson Education Ltd. with permission.

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- \_\_\_ 10. Truth lies in knowledge, not in majority opinion.
- \_\_\_ 11. He who fights and runs away lives to fight another day.
- \_\_\_ 12. He hath conquered well that hath made his enemies flee.
- \_\_\_ 13. Kill your enemies with kindness.
- \_\_\_ 14. A fair exchange brings no quarrel.
- \_\_\_ 15. No person has the final answer but every person has a piece to contribute.
- \_\_\_ 16. Stay away from people who disagree with you.
- \_\_\_ 17. Fields are won by those who believe in winning.
- \_\_\_ 18. Kind words are worth much and cost little.
- \_\_\_ 19. Tit for tat is fair play.
- \_\_\_ 20. Only the person who is willing to give up his or her monopoly on truth can ever profit from the truths that others told.
- \_\_\_ 21. Avoid quarrelsome people as they will only make your life miserable.
- \_\_\_ 22. A person who will not flee, will make others flee.
- \_\_\_ 23. Soft words ensure harmony.
- \_\_\_ 24. One gift for another makes good friends.
- \_\_\_ 25. Bring your conflicts into the open and face them directly; only then will the best solution be discovered.
- \_\_\_ 26. The best way of handling conflicts is to avoid them.
- \_\_\_ 27. Put your foot down where you mean to stand.
- \_\_\_ 28. Gentleness will triumph over anger.
- \_\_\_ 29. Getting part of what you want is better than not getting anything at all.
- \_\_\_ 30. Frankness, honesty, and trust will move mountains.
- \_\_\_ 31. There is nothing so important that you have to fight for it.
- \_\_\_ 32. There are two kinds of people in the world, the winners and the losers.
- \_\_\_ 33. When one hits you with a stone, hit him or her with a piece of cotton.
- \_\_\_ 34. When both people give in half-way, a fair settle is achieved.
- \_\_\_ 35. By digging and digging, the truth is discovered.

**Score Sheet**

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<b>TURTLE</b> Withdrawing	<b>SHARK</b> Forcing	<b>BEAR</b> Smoothing	<b>GIRAFFE</b> Compromising	<b>OWL</b> Collaborating/ Confronting
___ 1.	___ 2.	___ 3.	___ 4.	___ 5.
___ 6.	___ 7.	___ 8.	___ 9.	___ 10.
___ 11.	___ 12.	___ 13.	___ 14.	___ 15.
___ 16.	___ 17.	___ 18.	___ 19.	___ 20.
___ 21.	___ 22.	___ 23.	___ 24.	___ 25.
___ 26.	___ 27.	___ 28.	___ 29.	___ 30.
___ 31.	___ 32.	___ 33.	___ 34.	___ 35.
<b>___ Total</b>	<b>___ Total</b>	<b>___ Total</b>	<b>___ Total</b>	<b>___ Total</b>

Use a blank score sheet available at the end of the module to tally your score. The higher the total for each conflict strategy, the more frequently you tend to use that strategy. The lower the total score for each conflict strategy, the less frequently you tend to use this strategy.

## **Interpreting the Five Conflict Positions**

### **Avoiding/Withdrawing**

(low assertiveness; low cooperativeness)

Avoiding is the position where we are the most unassertive and the most uncooperative. Here, we attempt to satisfy neither our own concerns nor the concerns of the other party. In other words, our position is “not to take a position,” and the result is a stalemate where frustration and anger can build. Yet avoiding a conflict can be useful, particularly in situations where we feel the conflict is trivial or where we know we have no chance of satisfying our concerns.

### **Accommodating/Smoothing**

(low assertiveness; high cooperativeness)

In taking an Accommodating position during a conflict, we are making an attempt to satisfy concerns – only they’re the concerns of the other party. When we accommodate the other party, we’re being highly cooperative, but unassertive. However, “smoothing over” a dispute can subjugate our own needs, and, in the end, make us feel powerless and frustrated. That action can inadvertently intensify the situation, upping the ante. Still, there are times when we may choose to accommodate the other party for a larger purpose – to maintain harmony and stability in our organizations, for example.

### **Competing/Forcing**

(high assertiveness; low cooperativeness)

Competing is the direct opposite of Accommodating. When we compete, we’re attempting to satisfy our concerns while showing little interest in the needs of the other party. In fact, we’re operating at the point of extreme uncooperativeness and high assertiveness. No wonder we clash with others. This classic conflict situation can make it appear to the warring parties that there is no solution in sight. Yet, while competing would seem to be a poor choice, it can be viable. There’s not time, for instance, to address the other party’s concerns in an emergency or when we’re enforcing rules.

### **Compromising/Compromising**

(Moderate assertiveness & cooperativeness)

Many of us think of Compromising as a natural conflict resolution technique. And indeed, it can be partially effective in that way. As the position midway between Competing and Accommodating, Compromising means we give up half of our concerns in order to get the other half. This is also known as “splitting the difference” or “sharing.” According to the model, when we compromise, we have in a moderately assertive and moderately cooperative fashion. Compromising can provide a workable solution in several situations – when we’re operating

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under a deadline, when goals are likely to remain incompatible, when the issues are too complex to be addressed in a timely manner, etc.

### **Collaborating/Confronting**

(high assertiveness & cooperativeness)

The most ideal position – and the one that takes the most patience and commitment to achieve – is Collaborating. Unlike Accommodating, Competing, and Compromising, which only partially satisfy concerns, Collaborating satisfies the concerns of all parties. When we take a collaborative position, we are being both highly assertive and highly cooperative. Collaborating is of particular use when we want to work through feelings to improve a relationship, when concerns are too important to be compromised or accommodated away, and when we're looking to build a consensus.

Similarly, to the five conflict positions, the Ontario Ministry of Education (2007) has focused on three most common responses to conflict<sup>14</sup>:

- ✓ Avoidance (e.g. turtle)
- ✓ Confrontation (e.g. owl)
- ✓ Acquiescence or giving in to the other person (e.g. smoothing)

For a more in-depth exploration into your own conflict style, you may want to try the Thomas-Kilmann Inventory. The link has been provided in the list of Web Resources at the end of this module.

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<sup>14</sup> Ontario Ministry of Education. (2007). *Shared Solutions A Guide to Preventing and Resolving Conflicts Regarding Programs and Services for Students With Special Education Needs*. Retrieved from <https://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/general/elemsec/speced/shared.pdf>

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