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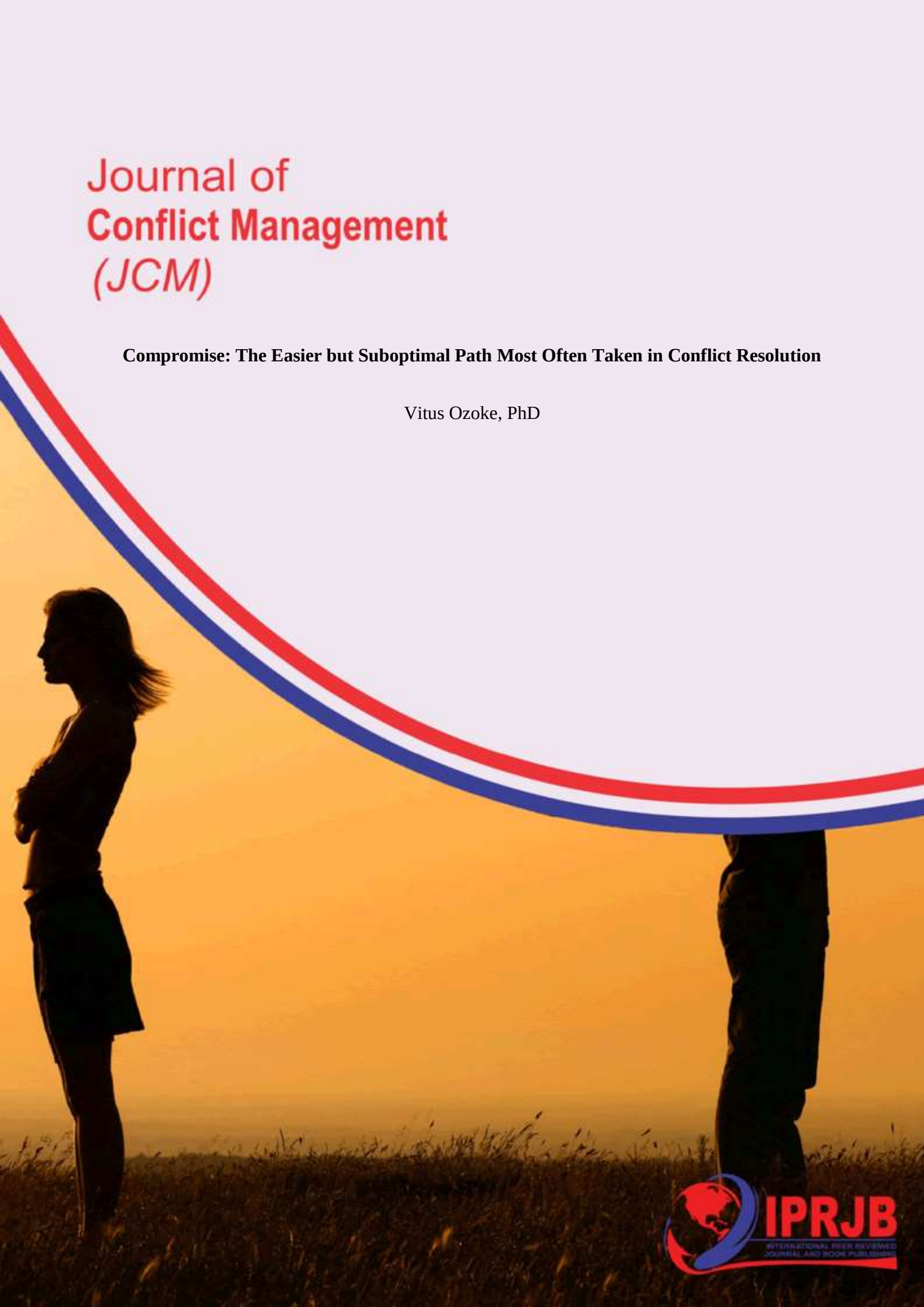

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Compromise: The Easier but Suboptimal Path Most Often Taken in Conflict Resolution

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Abstract

Purpose: This article critically examines the role of compromise in conflict resolution by posing two fundamental questions: (1) Does compromise represent the most effective approach to conflict resolution, yielding optimal outcomes for the involved parties? (2) Are many negotiated outcomes ultimately unsustainable in the long term due to an excessive focus on compromise instead of pursuing more optimal and enduring resolution strategies? To address these inquiries, the article argues that compromise, despite its prevalence in public discourse, is often misapplied and overstated within the field of conflict resolution.

Methodology: This article uses a theoretical framework approach. It uses established theories, models, and concepts as a roadmap to guide and structure the author's argument, thus providing a lens through which to examine the topic, draw connections, and understand its place and relationships within the broader network of existing theories and established ideas. The theoretical framework approach helps to narrow study focus, develop meaningful research questions, and ensure that a study builds upon existing knowledge in a logical and organized way. Using three standard and most frequently used conflict management self-assessment instruments by researchers and practitioners – Blake and Mouton's Managerial Grid, Jay Hall's Conflict Management Survey, and Thomas-Kilmann's Conflict Mode Instrument, the paper attempts to answer three questions: (1) What aspects of compromise have afforded it a position of privilege, priority, popularity, and prominence among the various options and approaches to conflict resolution? (2) Is compromise the method of conflict resolution that yields the best possible outcomes for the parties? (3) Could many negotiated conflict outcomes be unsustainable in the long run because the parties involved primarily focus on, pursue, and adopt a compromise rather than a more optimal and enduring approach to conflict resolution?

Findings: The findings suggest that compromise often constitutes an easier yet suboptimal choice in conflict resolution.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy: Drawing from its findings, the article advocates for an alternative, collaborative approach to conflict resolution, which may facilitate more sustainable and satisfactory outcomes for all parties involved. The temporary respite that compromise provides does not typically resolve the root causes of the conflict, which may lead to the reemergence of issues in the future.

Keywords: *Compromise, Collaboration, Competition, Conflict Resolution, Conflict Handling Modes, ADR, Decision-making*

INTRODUCTION

Once upon a time, two young boys lived in the same rural village. One day, by a twist of fate, the boys spotted an orange that had fallen off the back of a truck and rolled down the street. In that small village, oranges were a rare and precious commodity, as the soil was not conducive to the growth of orange trees. Oranges were not only scarce but also a great delicacy. So, upon seeing the orange drop from the truck, the two boys hurried toward it, their hearts filled with excitement. They both managed to grab the orange simultaneously, and neither was willing to let go, each torn between their desire and the other's. They stood in the scorching tropical sun, their minds in a dilemma, arguing over who should have sole possession of the orange.

Fortunately, an older woman visiting the farm happened to walk by. When she saw the two boys arguing—almost ready to fight—over an orange, she stopped to intervene. She asked them what was happening and inquired about what each boy wanted. Both insisted that the orange belonged to them and wanted it for themselves. With no witnesses or evidence to help her decide, the older woman used a Solomonic solution, akin to the biblical method of splitting the contested child. Surprisingly, both boys agreed to divide the orange in half, allowing each to keep one-half. The woman then took a sharp knife from her basket and cut the orange in half, giving each boy one-half before they went on their way. The older woman continued her walk home, feeling pleased with herself for successfully handling the conflict. When one of the boys got home, he peeled the orange, enjoyed the pulp and juice, and discarded the peel. The other boy, however, peeled his half, discarded the pulp and juice, and gave the peel to his mother to make an orange cake for the family. This is a classic example of compromise in conflict resolution.

In its fundamental essence, a compromise can be defined as a mutually accepted agreement that seeks to reconcile divergent perspectives or claims (Spang, 2023). It involves a negotiated settlement in which parties make concessions, giving up part of their demands, to reach a common understanding, thereby facilitating conflict resolution and promoting cooperation (Lepora, 2012; Weinstock, 2013; Golding, 1979). The discourse surrounding compromise acknowledges it as a legitimate method for addressing disagreements and resolving conflicts. Certainly, compromise belongs on the solution side in the continuum of potential responses to disagreements and conflicts (Bellamy et al., 2012). However, compromise is intricate and multifaceted, encompassing a range of moral, ethical, and practical considerations (Baume & Papadopoulos, 2022; Fumurescu, 2013).

This intricate and multifaceted nature of compromise on normative and epistemic levels has been part of my experience as someone who teaches conflict resolution. I have observed that when I have asked my students, especially in my foundational classes, to define – or even describe – conflict resolution, most of them have incorporated compromise as a definitional element. I use my foundational students to make this point only because that is where I find this habit most prevalent. Otherwise, my upper-level and graduate students also view and treat compromise as an essential definitional element of conflict resolution, just not as many as my foundational students. Also, beyond the classrooms, for many people, conflict resolution is the process by which two or more individuals, groups, organizations, or even states that have found themselves in conflict situations attempt to reach a compromise. In other words, conflict resolution has become synonymous with reaching a compromise for many people, including the older woman in the orange story.

Considering that compromise is just one of the ways people in conflict attempt to resolve their differences, what aspects of compromise have afforded it a position of privilege, priority,

popularity, and prominence among the various options and approaches to conflict resolution? Is compromise the method of conflict resolution that yields the best possible outcomes for the parties? Could many negotiated conflict outcomes be unsustainable in the long run because the parties involved primarily focus on, pursue, and adopt a compromise rather than a more optimal and enduring approach to conflict resolution?

A primary goal of this paper is to answer those questions and, in doing so, provide critical insight into a possible reason for the failure of some compromise-oriented resolutions, as well as to debunk the pervasive myth of compromise that has led to its unique, popular, and privileged treatment as a constant definitional and descriptive element of conflict resolution. However, let me clearly state that my goal in this paper is not to launch an all-out assault on compromise. Surely, there are situations and contexts in which compromise is an effective and desirable resolution method. Even then, however, it is essential to acknowledge that compromise necessitates both parties to make partial concessions regarding their respective interests. Some conflicts involve interests and concerns that are so critical that even minimal concessions are unacceptable, making compromise an unviable option. In such cases, alternative conflict-handling strategies, such as collaborating or competing, may be more effective.

Compromising is particularly suited for issues of moderate significance to the parties involved—issues that are important but do not reach a critical point. When adopting the compromising mode, both parties must share the burden of concessions equally; an imbalance, where one party consistently offers concessions, can lead to resentment and hostility. Therefore, ensuring that concessions are reciprocated fairly is essential for maintaining a constructive dialogue and relationship (Thomas, 2002).

Furthermore, compromise is often used in situations where collaborative or competitive strategies are impractical. For example, compromising may be relevant when a temporary resolution is needed for a more complex issue, allowing ongoing progress until a more permanent solution can be developed later. Additionally, the compromising approach is applied when parties of equal power face a win-lose scenario where collaboration has failed, and competition is unlikely to produce favorable results. In such instances, one or both parties may realize that more aggressive conflict-handling strategies could jeopardize their relationship, and compromise can help mitigate potential harm (Thomas, 2002).

Additionally, compromise is a favorable approach in addressing what Rawls (2001, p. 4) refers to as "the fact of reasonable pluralism," meaning that diverse religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines fundamentally characterize contemporary democratic societies. While each possesses a degree of reasonableness, these doctrines often stand in irreconcilable opposition, requiring a framework for understanding and navigating the complex interactions between differing belief systems within a democratic context.

In pluralistic societies characterized by reasonable disagreement, compromise fosters an environment where equal concern and respect are extended to conflicting reasonable views (Bellamy et al., 2012). Furthermore, when parties involved in a disagreement hold equally reasonable yet irreconcilable perspectives, pursuing collaboration may seem undesirable, as it requires an unjustifiable alteration of beliefs among those with reasonable viewpoints. However, with compromise, parties can maintain their respective reasonable positions, offering a more acceptable resolution to instances of reasonable disagreement (Spang, 2023). Thus, compromise is a practical and desirable approach in specific conflict scenarios, but this does not invalidate the questions that motivate this paper, nor does it change the goal of the inquiry.

To achieve the goal of the inquiry, I propose discussing three standard and most frequently used self-assessment instruments by researchers, organizational experts, and practitioners in their attempts to "understand and to diagnose interpersonal conflict behaviors" (Shockley-Zalabak, 1988, p. 302) and "to learn the most effective strategies for managing conflicts" (Samantara, 2004, p. 299). The proposed instruments are:

1. The Blake and Mouton's Managerial Grid,
2. Jay Hall's Conflict Management Survey, and
3. The Thomas-Kilmann's Conflict Mode Instrument

All three instruments indicate that humans have and select from various approaches to deal with conflict situations (Samantara, 2004). These approaches are often described in the literature as conflict styles arising from various combinations of a two-dimensional model: concern for goals (or results) and concern for relationships (or people). These instruments, along with the models they present, aim to explain different methods for managing conflicts and their implications for individual, inter-departmental, or organizational effectiveness (Samantara, 2004, p. 299; Froemling, Grice, & Skinner, 2011).

The Blake-Mouton Managerial Grid

The Blake-Mouton Managerial Grid, a significant self-assessment tool developed by Robert R. Blake and Jane S. Mouton in 1964, serves as a valuable resource for individuals and organizations seeking to understand and enhance their leadership styles (Strong et al, 2013; Blake & Mouton, 1964). Originally known as the Leadership Grid, it was later redesignated by Blake and McCanse in 1991 (Blake & McCanse, 1991). This tool identifies five potential conflict resolution modes: withdrawing, smoothing, compromising, forcing, and confronting or problem-solving (Samantara, 2004; Blake & Mouton, 1964). The original five-category classification scheme developed by Blake and Mouton has influenced subsequent management theories (Samantara, 2004, p. 300; Hall, 1969; Thomas, 1976; Rahim, 1983; Pareek, 1982; Walton et al., 1966; Likert & Likert, 1976).

Robert R. Blake was an American management theoretician and a pioneer in organizational dynamics. Jane S. Mouton was also a management theoretician. They focused their management grid theory on the human side of business leadership while working to enhance effective leadership at Exxon. The grid model illustrates how much a manager or leader emphasizes production, people, or both. A manager's or leader's behavioral or managerial style can be determined by their position on the 9-point scale grid. The grid is plotted on two basic behavioral dimensions:

i. A manager's *concern for people* versus
ii. A manager's *concern for results*.

The Blake-Mouton Managerial Grid operates on the premise that managers and leaders typically have a dominant management and leadership style. This style is their primary approach, but they may switch to other styles if their dominant style is perceived as ineffective (Blake & Mouton, 1964). This understanding underscores the adaptability and effectiveness of various styles, depending on the situation and the team's needs. Essentially, the grid is a measure of priority. Managers who fall on the first dimension, concern for people, will prioritize their staff members' needs, interests, and welfare. In contrast, managers who fall on the second dimension, concern for results, will prioritize efficiency and productivity. Managers who focus too much on results and productivity may overwork their staff, overlook their needs and concerns, and witness them suffer from stress and burnout. On the other hand, those who

place the needs and welfare of their staff above production will find that, while their staff are less stressed and less likely to experience burnout, production will slow down.

By plotting a manager's degree of result or task-centeredness against their people-centeredness, the Blake-Mouton Grid reveals the following five management styles:

Impoverished Management (low on results and low on people):

This management style is for managers who are low on both dimensions. They show little concern for people and results. They are indifferent to the needs and welfare of their subordinate team members and do not worry about their team's performance. The impoverished manager is unconcerned with people and outcomes, making them ineffective. They have little regard for building organizational systems that support production needs and demonstrate minimal interest in creating a motivating team environment. This leads to complete disorganization, disharmony, dysfunction, dissatisfaction, and disaffection. The impoverished management style delivers on its name: it impoverishes the business or organization. Staff morale is low, adversely affecting productivity. No organization should want a leader who adopts this management style, as they are unsuitable for business.

This approach represents the least effective strategy for conflict resolution. Leaders who embody this style are often characterized by their absence, avoidance, or disinterest in addressing conflict, which leads to unresolved issues that may intensify over time. Neglecting both team dynamics and productivity can create an environment that is ripe for conflict escalation, undermining overall organizational effectiveness.

Task Management – produce or perish (high on result and low on people):

This is also called the 'authoritarian' or authority-compliance managers. The task manager is autocratic, adopting stringent and inflexible work rules, policies, and procedures. The task manager sees and utilizes punishment as an effective tool for team motivation. The task management-oriented leader is very high on concern for results but very low on concern for people and their needs, concerns, and welfare. They view their team members as mere means to an end, as they are more concerned with accomplishing tasks than with the people carrying them out.

The task management-oriented manager seeks the most efficient method of accomplishing tasks, even if it compromises the workers' needs and welfare. This management approach can create impressive production results initially, but these results are not sustainable over time. An organization with this management style fosters an unhappy workplace with low employee morale. Additionally, the organizational culture is poor, and the employee turnover rate is, as expected, high. Ultimately, this leads to low productivity.

Middle of the Road (medium concern for result and medium concern for people):

This manager is also known as the status quo manager. As the name suggests, this style represents the halfway point between people-centered and results-centered management approaches. The manager or leader who adopts this management style strikes a balance between people and results and between staff needs and production demands. They support their employees' needs and well-being while remaining aware of the crucial business and organizational objective of meeting key performance indicators. To achieve the necessary balance, the middle-of-the-road manager has a constantly shifting focus. This means this management style is not as effective as it may seem. In trying to balance 'people needs' and 'production needs,' the middle-of-the-road manager continuously compromises, failing to

inspire high performance and fully address people's needs. Consequently, this leads to suboptimal and mediocre performance in both dimensions.

This managerial style often fosters conflict due to its authoritarian approach. Managers may resort to threats and punitive measures to enforce compliance, which can create resentment and lower motivation among team members. While conflicts may be suppressed, the underlying issues persist, ultimately leading to more complications and potential sabotage. Although this style may offer temporary solutions, it risks inadequately addressing conflicts, resulting in unresolved tensions.

Country Club (high on people and low on results):

The country club-oriented manager is a people pleaser. This manager prioritizes people highly while placing minimal emphasis on results and production. They assume that if they make their team members happy and secure, those team members will, in turn, work hard and meet production needs. Although the country club manager is well-liked for being perceived as caring, his limited attention to results and production can lead to the team failing to meet its key performance indicators. The work environment often becomes too relaxed and fun for team members, resembling a country club. However, productivity suffers due to the lack of control and direction stemming from this environment.

While this style prioritizes interpersonal relationships and team well-being, it may lead to conflict avoidance. Managers using this approach might hesitate to confront conflicts directly, fearing that such confrontations could disrupt the team's harmonious atmosphere. As a result, unaddressed issues may fester, potentially escalating into more significant problems. The focus on maintaining a positive environment, rather than achieving results, can contribute to the mishandling or incomplete resolution of conflicts.

Team Management (high on results and high on people):

This manager pays close attention to both people and results. They care as deeply about their staff as they do about production. According to the Blake Mouton management model, this is the most effective management style. This manager is dedicated to the success of their work and strives to care for the people they work with. Team managers are strongly committed to their organization's goals and mission and work diligently to motivate and inspire those they supervise. The combined effect is a happy team and a thriving, high-performing organization that achieves its key performance indicators.

A team member under a management-oriented leader feels respected and empowered to contribute their best efforts toward the organization's success. There is a shared prioritization of the organization's and individuals' needs, with neither set of needs considered higher or lower than the other. Organizational team members understand and buy into the organization's purpose as key stakeholders. People and production needs coincide in that stake-holding relationship with the organization. When both needs align, an environment and culture of trust and respect are created, leading to job satisfaction and excellent results.

This managerial style fosters an environment of open communication, collaboration, and mutual respect, making it particularly effective for constructively resolving conflicts. Leaders who adopt this approach actively involve team members in the solution-finding process, promoting a sense of ownership and commitment to the resolutions achieved.

In summary, the effectiveness of these management styles varies significantly regarding their impact on conflict resolution, with Team Management emerging as the most conducive to

constructive outcomes. Each management style presents distinct advantages and disadvantages regarding team performance, productivity, and morale. Impoverished Management may be suitable for temporary situations that require minimal effort; however, its low concern for both production and personnel can lead to suboptimal output, reduced morale, and an increased potential for conflict. This shortcoming is also seen in Country Club Management, where a lack of emphasis on production can result in lower output and hinder the achievement of organizational objectives, despite fostering strong interpersonal relationships and creating a positive work environment.

Middle-of-the-Road Management strives to balance concern for personnel and production, resulting in stable performance that is not necessarily optimal. While this approach can prevent significant issues, it may not effectively inspire or motivate team members. Task Management, characterized by a strong focus on production, can achieve high output in the short term. However, this style's inherent low concern for personnel can lead to decreased morale, increased conflict, and stifled innovation. Conversely, Team Management, which prioritizes both production and personnel, can foster high morale, strong team relationships, and optimal performance outcomes. Nevertheless, implementing this management style can be challenging, especially when team members lack adequate skills or engagement. Therefore, the choice of management style should be carefully considered in relation to the specific dynamics and needs of both the team and the organization.

Hall's Conflict Management Survey (CMS)

Hall's CMS is crucial for studying management styles and conflict resolution. It is one of the first and most frequently used instruments developed to assess interpersonal conflicts in organizational settings. Created by Jay Hall of Teleometrics International, it was first published in 1969 and revised in 1973 and 1986. The CMS instrument is designed to measure preferences for "win-lose, yield-lose, lose-leave, compromise, and synergistic styles in personal, interpersonal, small group, intergroup, and overall contexts" (Shockley-Zalabak, 1988, p. 303). According to Hall (1973, p. 6), the five conflict styles are "…equally available responses to conflict among which individuals choose and order in a way consistent with their particular interpretations of conflict."

Hall (1973) argues that individuals' approaches to managing conflict are based on the fundamental and significant assumption that "everyone uses each of the styles depicted at one time or another" (p. 6) but that each individual is behaviorally predisposed to their preferred responses to conflict situations. It reframes the original dimensions developed by Blake and Mouton (1964) for testing conflict-handling styles in personal, interpersonal, group, and intergroup settings (Shockley-Zalabak, 1988). Hall's CMS outlines an individual's predispositions and preferences for the following five conflict-handling modes:

Win-Lose: In a professional setting, a win-lose mindset may be shown when managers prioritize their own goals and interests over relationships with team members, leading to a competitive and potentially hostile work environment. The win-lose style is characterized by a focus on achieving personal goals, often disregarding the relational dynamics involved. This approach can be particularly advantageous in high-stakes situations that require prompt decision-making or assertive action. However, the potential negative repercussions of this style include the escalation of relational tensions and emotional distress, which may ultimately undermine long-term relationships. Research suggests that while effective in certain contexts, an overreliance on competing can lead to detrimental outcomes for both the individual and the wider relational network (Thomas, 1976).

Yield-Lose: This is the direct opposite of the win-lose mindset in conflict. Those who engage in conflict with a yield-lose attitude sacrifice their personal goals for the sake of the parties' relationship. Maintaining the parties' relationships is more important than focusing on personal goals; therefore, the relationship is prioritized even at the expense of personal goals and interests. The yield-lose style emphasizes prioritizing the needs and desires of others over one's own. This approach is beneficial for maintaining relationships, especially in situations where one party can afford to concede. However, the potential drawback is the development of resentment due to the continual neglect of one's own needs. If individuals consistently yield and subordinate their interests, they may experience a decrease in self-worth and an increased likelihood of unresolved conflicts (Blake & Mouton, 1964).

Lose-Leave:

This reflects a hopeless attitude toward conflict. Those who adopt this attitude leave the conflict unpursued and unaddressed, either physically or psychologically, sometimes in both ways. For them, neither personal goals nor relationship objectives hold significance or are worth pursuing. Lose-leave involves withdrawing from conflict, giving individuals time for reflection and potentially aiding the de-escalation of tensions. While this strategy may prevent immediate confrontation, it carries the inherent risk of allowing unaddressed issues to develop into larger conflicts. Moreover, a lose-lose style can be seen as uncooperative behavior, which may foster frustration among those seeking resolution (Kilmann & Thomas, 1977).

Compromise: With this approach, parties aim to find a middle ground regarding personal goals and relationships. They neither pursue personal goals to the fullest nor fully invest in maintaining relationships, resulting in suboptimal gains in both dimensions. This style involves both parties making concessions to reach a mutually acceptable solution. While compromise can facilitate expedient conflict resolution, it risks oversimplifying complex issues and may leave underlying problems unaddressed. Scholars suggest that while compromising can serve as a practical solution, it rarely provides a fully satisfactory resolution (van Kleef et al., 2004).

Synergistic: This approach to conflict prioritizes both parties' personal goals, interests, and mutual relationships. Both personal goals and mutual relationships are pursued equally through joint problem-solving. This conflict approach offers substantial personal gains alongside a strong level of relationship for the parties involved. The synergistic style aims to create a win-win outcome by promoting mutual understanding and integrating diverse needs. This approach actively involves all parties in discovering comprehensive solutions to conflicts. Although a synergistic approach can enhance trust and satisfaction, it is often criticized for being time-consuming; its effectiveness decreases in situations that require immediate resolution (Fisher et al., 1991). This underscores the importance of situational awareness when using this style.

In summary, each conflict management style in Hall's CMS has distinct implications for resolving conflicts. The appropriateness and effectiveness of a specific style depend on unique contextual factors, including the urgency of the situation, the relational dynamics involved, and the overarching objectives of the parties. A comprehensive understanding of these conflict management styles allows individuals to adapt their strategies to suit particular circumstances, promoting more effective and constructive conflict resolution practices.

According to Hall (1969, p. 14), the CMS is based on "a theory, or model, of conflict dynamics, which allows us to identify 'styles' of conflict management. The instrument identifies and explains, in terms of the models, our preferred ways of behaving in conflict situations." A unique feature of Hall's CMS is that it is highly contextualized. Hall suggests that people's

behavioral preferences in conflict situations vary depending on the context; hence, the CMS is a composite of individual behavioral preferences measured in four contexts: personal, interpersonal, small group, and intergroup. An individual's general theory of conflict belongs in the personal context. When the same individual encounters conflicts with one or more others, their behavioral preferences regarding those others are categorized in the interpersonal context.

The small group context denotes an individual's behavioral preferences when conflicts arise in task groups of which they are a member. The intergroup context refers to an individual's behavioral preferences in group conflicts (Hall, 1976; 1969). Context measurement is unique to Hall's CMS and distinguishes it from other instruments measuring preferences for the five common conflict styles (Shockley-Zalabak, 1988).

Research by Thomas and Kilmann (1978) shows a correlation between the CMS and the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI) across all five conflict resolution modes. Furthermore, the CMS exhibits significant correlations with the Lawrence-Lorsch model and the Blake and Mouton frameworks, particularly in terms of competition, collaboration, avoidance, and accommodation styles (Shockley-Zalabak, 1988). Nichols (1984) concludes that the CMS and the TKI are sufficiently consistent and comparable with the conflict styles described in the Blake and Mouton model, reinforcing the idea of their relative applicability in conflict management research.

Conversely, Hall's Conflict Management Styles (CMS) framework is based on theoretical constructs; however, it has been noted that it lacks empirical validation in terms of actual behavioral predictions (Shockley-Zalabak, 1988). Critiques highlight the CMS's shortcomings regarding psychometric tests of validity and reliability (Clemons, 1980; Shockley-Zalabak, 1988). Shockley-Zalabak (1988) emphasizes that Hall does not provide necessary validity checks, nor does he offer clear explanations concerning the content validity of the scale items used within the CMS. The instrument has been described as more complex in both administration and interpretation compared to alternative conflict management assessments, requiring a greater investment of time and cognitive resources (Shockley-Zalabak, 1988). Consequently, it is recommended that the CMS be used primarily as a tool for identifying predispositions toward conflict rather than as a strong predictor of specific behavioral choices in particular situations.

Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument

The Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument, commonly known as TKI, has been a cornerstone of conflict resolution assessment for nearly half a century. Developed as a research tool by Kenneth W. Thomas and Ralph H. Kilmann in 1974, the TKI is a test of individual conflict-handling styles. It stems from theoretical adaptations by Kenneth Thomas of the Mouton-Blake Managerial Grid, an earlier model of management styles created by Robert Blake and Jane Mouton in the 1960s. The TKI enables individuals to identify their preferred conflict-handling modes from five styles: competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding, and accommodating. Its interpretation and feedback components also guide individuals on the most effective and appropriate use of each conflict-handling style.

Beyond its extensive use in human resources and organizational development, TKI is also employed by practitioners in various fields of alternative dispute resolution, including mediators, negotiators, arbitrators, and others involved in diverse coaching disciplines. In all these contexts, the aim is to assess an individual's behavior in conflict situations where the

concerns of two individuals or groups appear incompatible. According to TKI, a person's behavior in such situations can be evaluated along two fundamental dimensions:

i. *Assertiveness*, which measures the extent to which the person tries to address their concerns; and
ii. *Cooperativeness* measures the extent to which a person attempts to satisfy the other person's concerns.

The TKI uses the two dimensions—assertiveness and cooperativeness—to create a grid of five conflict-handling modes. In other words, depending on an individual's level of assertiveness or cooperativeness, they will respond to a conflict situation in one of the following five modes:

Competing: This is also known as contending. On the assertiveness-cooperativeness grid, the contender is high in assertiveness and low in cooperativeness. Those who prefer competing as their conflict style view and engage in conflict as a zero-sum, win-lose game. While some may label them selfish and self-centered, they do not value joint value creation and problem-solving. Instead of participating in a resolution process that ensures some value for all parties, those who adopt the competing approach focus on claiming as much value as they can for themselves. Competitors exhibit autocratic, aggressive, confrontational, and intimidating behaviors in conflict (Thomas & Kilmann, 1974). They engage in power plays and apply pressure. While there are a few situations where a competitive style is beneficial in conflict, in most other cases, a competitive approach to conflict resolution can irreparably damage relationships. It may also lead the other party or parties to adopt similar competitive behaviors. After all, two can play that game.

Avoiding: The conflict avoider scores low on both dimensions of the assertiveness-cooperativeness grid. Many individuals are conflict-averse and will go to great lengths to evade confrontation. They are neither assertive nor cooperative and do not strive to meet their own interests or satisfy the concerns of the other party. This low regard for their interests and relationships with others leads them to either ignore or withdraw from conflict rather than confront it. While avoidance may be a strategic choice when a party needs more time to process the conflict situation or when the risks of engagement outweigh the potential gains, it can also cause the conflict to fester into a more destructive outcome (Thomas & Kilmann, 1974).

Compromising: Regarding the assertiveness-cooperativeness grid, compromisers fall in the mid-range for both dimensions. Conflict compromisers have a medium value for their interests and relationships with the other party or parties. They are willing to sacrifice some of their goals if the other parties sacrifice some of their interests. It embodies the classic "meet-me-in-the-middle," "split-the-difference," "meet-me-halfway" attitude toward resolving conflict. It represents a give-a-little, get-a-little approach to conflict. By splitting the difference, compromise can lead to an outcome that is less creative, less ideal, and suboptimal (Thomas & Kilmann, 1974).

Compromise is the method that conflicting parties adopt when they cannot afford the zero-sum risk of competition or lack the time, resources, and creativity for collaboration. However, they share a commitment to fairness and equity. Compromise is less resource-intensive – in terms of time and effort—but it comes with the trade-off of a suboptimal gain in both outcome and relationship dimensions. By its nature, compromise does not necessarily satisfy all parties or yield a decision that makes the most business sense; instead, it ensures that the decision is fair, just, and equitable, even if both or all parties experience a loss (Thomas & Kilmann, 1974).

Accommodating: The conflict accommodator scores low on assertiveness and high on cooperativeness. They are unassertive and cooperative. The accommodator values the parties' relationship more than their interests, setting aside personal needs to maintain peace and preserve the relationship. They engage in smoothing and harmonizing behaviors (Thomas & Kilmann, 1974). However, the problem with that approach is that these behaviors can sometimes generate false solutions to problems and result in the opposite of the desired outcome (Thomas & Kilmann, 1974). Strategically, accommodation is helpful when a party admits they are wrong or aims to cut or minimize losses to preserve relationships.

Collaborating: This is the conflict-handling mode where parties' assertiveness and cooperativeness are high. The conflict collaborator values both their interests and their relationship with the other party or parties (Thomas & Kilmann, 1974). To achieve these two seemingly divergent goals, collaboration employs principled, problem-solving negotiation to generate creative solutions that address the interests, concerns, and needs of all parties. Collaboration is the stage where actual conflict resolution occurs. Collaborators are willing and able to roll up their sleeves, jointly identify underlying interests and concerns, test any assumptions that inhibit joint resolution efforts, and understand the perspectives of all parties involved. Collaboration fosters respect, builds trust, and strengthens relationships when applied effectively. With collaboration, parties engage in the conflict jointly and directly, demonstrating their willingness to fulfill their needs in the conflict situation. This is the conflict approach that ensures a win-win outcome for all parties (Thomas & Kilmann, 1974).

The Blake-Mouton Managerial Grid, Hall's Conflict Management Survey (CMS), and the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI) serve to elucidate the varied responses individuals exhibit in the face of conflict. However, these frameworks diverge significantly in their foundational assumptions, multidimensional aspects, and practical applications.

The Managerial Grid posits that leadership styles can be delineated based on a dual focus: concern for people and concern for production. This model inherently suggests that effective leadership is contingent upon balancing these two concerns to optimize organizational outcomes. In contrast, Hall's CMS foregrounds the notion that individuals possess distinct styles for managing conflict, highlighting a tendency for some individuals to eschew conflict in order to preserve relational harmony. The TKI complements this by identifying specific modes of conflict handling that are correlated with varying degrees of assertiveness and cooperativeness.

In terms of their underlying assumptions, the Blake-Mouton Managerial Grid (the Grid) classifies leaders according to their levels of concern for production and concern for people, thus emphasizing a dyadic relationship between these dimensions. Conversely, Hall's CMS operates on the premise that individuals vary in their conflict management preferences, particularly in their inclination towards conflict avoidance. The TKI adopts a framework suggesting that individuals exhibit predictable behavioral responses to conflict, thereby enabling an assessment of different conflict-handling modes.

The dimensionality of these instruments further elucidates their distinctions. The Grid employs a bi-dimensional approach, represented by the y-axis (Concern for People) and x-axis (Concern for Production). Although Hall's CMS does not adhere to a strictly two-dimensional construct akin to the Grid or TKI, it categorizes conflict management strategies—including avoidance, smoothing, and problem-solving—into discernible approaches. The TKI articulates five distinct modes of conflict handling—competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding, and accommodating—anchored in the dual dimensions of assertiveness and cooperativeness.

The practical applications of these frameworks reveal their utility in divergent contexts. The Grid serves predominantly to analyze leadership styles and their implications for conflict dynamics within teams. Hall's CMS is oriented towards identifying individual preferences in conflict resolution, thereby providing insight into how varying styles can influence group dynamics. The TKI, widely recognized for its efficacy in assessing personal conflict management styles, helps individuals understand their preferences and select appropriate approaches in diverse scenarios.

In summary, the Blake-Mouton Managerial Grid, Hall's Conflict Management Survey, and the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument each provide valuable yet distinct perspectives on the interplay between leadership and conflict management. While the Grid emphasizes broader leadership styles and their potential impact on conflict, the CMS and TKI provide more focused insights into individual conflict-handling preferences and styles. Ultimately, the Grid provides a comprehensive framework for leadership analysis. At the same time, the CMS and TKI contribute to a nuanced understanding of individual conflict management strategies, underscoring the importance of recognizing individual differences in navigating conflictual situations.

Situational Factors and Conflict Handling Styles

Conflict resolution is a complex process, and no universally optimal approach applies to all situations. The five conflict-handling modes in each of the three models possess distinct advantages and disadvantages. Their effectiveness is contingent upon appropriate contextual application and the proficiency of the individual employing them. A crucial factor in the successful resolution of conflicts lies in the ability to discern the appropriate approach for a given situation and to execute it with skill and competence. Understanding the nuances of each mode, including the situational factors, enables practitioners to navigate conflicts more effectively, leading to more constructive outcomes.

Several factors, comprising a range of cultural, psychological, and situational elements, significantly influence individual conflict styles (Rahim, 1986). Cultural norms play a crucial role, as beliefs about conflict resolution vary widely across different cultures (Ting-Toomey et al., 1991; Doucet et al., 2009; Kim et al., 2007; Kaushal & Kwantes, 2006; Morris et al., 1998; Kirkman et al., 2006). For instance, some cultures emphasize direct communication and confrontation as effective strategies, while others prioritize indirect communication and conflict avoidance, reflecting distinct cultural values (Pekerti & Thomas, 2003; Laurent, 1983; Holt & DeVore, 2005; Elsayed-EkJiouly & Buda, 1996). Personality traits are another influential factor (Tehrani & Yamini, 2020). Research suggests that individuals characterized by confidence, assertiveness, and ambition are more inclined to adopt a competitive conflict style. Conversely, those who display open-mindedness, empathy, and creativity are often more predisposed to collaborative approaches (Antonioni, 1998; Park & Antonioni, 2007; Wood & Bell, 2008; Tehrani & Yamini, 2020).

Additionally, personal values such as fairness, cooperation, and individual achievement have a significant impact on conflict resolution strategies (Newman & Nollen, 1996; Lachman et al., 1994). Emotional factors, including feelings of anger, fear, or frustration, further shape how individuals respond to conflict and the styles they choose to employ (Chan et al., 2014; Ann & Yang, 2012). Goals during conflict situations are crucial, as they determine whether individuals prioritize winning, maintaining relationships, or achieving mutually beneficial outcomes (Alvarez, 2011; Spangler, 2003; Barwick-Snell & Walker, 2017). The relative power dynamics among conflicting parties also influence their approaches (Green et al., 2023); individuals with

greater power may exhibit more assertive or dominating behaviors, while those with less power might be more inclined to avoid confrontation or accommodate the preferences of others.

Situational factors—including the nature and significance of the conflict, as well as the time constraints for resolution—also contribute to the selection of conflict strategies. High-stakes conflicts are likely to prompt more assertive or competitive behavior, while conflicts involving long-term relationships may encourage collaborative problem-solving. Emotional intelligence, which Salovey & Mayer (1990, p. 189) define as "the ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one's thinking and actions" also influences conflict style (Mayer & Salovey, 1997; Wong & Law, 2002; Schlaerth et al., 2013). In conclusion, various factors such as communication skills, emotional intelligence, and prior experiences with conflict interplay to shape an individual's conflict style, reflecting a complex interplay of influences that warrant careful consideration in conflict resolution contexts (Jordan & Troth, 2004; Yu et al., 2006).

The Myth and Legend of Compromise

The analysis derived from the three instruments shows that compromise is not the optimal strategy for conflict resolution. When parties embroiled in conflict assert that they have reached a successful compromise, such claims often suggest a complete and satisfactory resolution of their differences—a fundamentally misleading assertion, as this can hardly be the case with a compromise outcome. Compromise, by its intrinsic nature, logic, and operational framework, does not yield a comprehensive or satisfactory resolution. A classic compromise can be seen as a comparative agreement in which each party involved concedes some demands to strengthen their respective positions relative to the existing status quo. Such an agreement requires that the concessions made are influenced, at least in part, by the opposing party's preferences and negotiations. The nature of the sacrifice in this context extends beyond simply receiving less than initially desired; it also involves the perception of receiving less than what one believes is deserved, shaped by the dynamics of opposition. Furthermore, this process often requires a re-evaluation and potential adjustment of one's principles. The essential characteristics of compromise can thus be expressed as mutual sacrifice and willful opposition, both of which underscore the intricate interplay of interests and values among the negotiating parties (Gutmann & Thompson, 2012).

Although compromise and collaboration enable conflicting parties to address their needs and interests, compromise often falls short of fully meeting these needs and interests. This insufficiency represents a crucial distinction between the two approaches, as it highlights a significant difference in prioritizing whose needs and interests are met and the extent to which they are satisfactorily met. Understanding this distinction is essential for practitioners and scholars of conflict resolution, as it underscores the importance of adopting collaborative strategies over compensatory compromise solutions.

Compromise is a resolution strategy in which each party achieves partial rather than complete satisfaction of their needs. This approach can be understood as a distribution of resources or interests that may take various forms, such as a 50/50 split, where both parties achieve equal satisfaction, or a 75/25 distribution, in which one party secures 75 percent satisfaction while the other party receives 25 percent. Regardless of the specific allocations of the parties' met interests—whether 50/50, 75/25, or 60/40 percent—the split still adds up to 100 percent. This illustrates the distributive nature of compromise, reflecting a zero-sum outcome in which the satisfaction gained by one party results in a corresponding decrease in satisfaction for the other.

The objective of compromise is to identify an expedient and mutually acceptable solution that allows both parties to achieve some degree of satisfaction.

In the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI) framework, compromise falls between the competing and accommodating strategies. In this context, the compromising party concedes more than the competing party offers but achieves more of its interests than the accommodating party. Additionally, compromise differs from avoidance, as it requires the compromising party to address an issue more directly than the avoiding party. However, it does not delve as deeply and thoroughly into exploring interests as collaboration does. Compromise involves finding a middle ground through exchanging concessions and determining a solution that advances the negotiation or other resolution process.

The Orange story dramatizes the suboptimality of compromise as a method for resolving conflict. As illustrated by the story, each boy derived 50 percent of a possible 100 percent satisfaction from the orange. Each boy used only half of the orange; the other half was wasted as peel or juice. The boy who wanted only the peel of the orange received 50 percent of the peel, while the boy who desired the juice but not the peel discarded the other 50 percent of the orange peel. The boy who wanted the juice from squeezing the flesh of the orange obtained only 50 percent of the juice, with the other 50 percent wasted by the boy who wanted only the peel.

Like the older woman in the orange story who went away, gloating in self-admiration and fulfillment, believing that she had done a marvelous job of conflict resolution, perhaps not knowing the harm she had caused to both children, third-party interveners in conflict fall into the same mediocrity with compromise. The mistake that parties and interveners often make in conflict resolution is focusing too easily on parties' positions rather than their interests. When the inquiry centers on position, the result is a distributive, zero-sum, win-lose outcome. Each boy's position in the orange story is that the orange was his. When parties in conflict are pushed into positional corners, compromise becomes an attractive and possibly the only approach to resolving their dispute.

Had the older woman in the orange fable furthered her inquiry into the realm of interest, she would have provided each child 100 percent satisfaction from that orange. If she had followed her "what do you want" question with "Why do you want what you want?", one of the boys would have indicated that all he wanted was the orange peel, while the other boy would have disclosed that all he wanted was the flesh of the orange so he could squeeze the juice out of it. This way, the woman would have utilized her knife more effectively. She would have used her knife to peel the orange instead of cutting it in half. She would have given the whole peel to the boy who wanted the peel, but not the juice, and the entire flesh to the boy who wished for the juice, but not the peel. This illustrates the appeal of the collaborative (confrontational or problem-solving) approach in conflict resolution.

It must be acknowledged that there is a cultural dimension to conflict style (Hofstede, 1980; Ting-Toomey et al., 1991; 2000). Studies on cultural orientations reveal that individuals with a collectivistic orientation exhibit a higher propensity to engage in withdrawing and compromising strategies compared to their individualistic counterparts (Ting-Toomey, 1988). Conversely, individuals from individualistic cultures are more likely to employ competing strategies than those from collectivistic cultures (Ting-Toomey, 1988; Elsayed-Ekhouly & Buda, 1996; Rahim & Blum, 1994; Kagan, Knight, & Martinez-Romero, 1982). All findings in Holt & DeVore's (2005) study demonstrate statistically significant differences, with group means differing by more than one standard deviation, providing strong evidence of genuine

disparities in behaviors across cultural orientations. The preference for withdrawing among collectivistic individuals aligns with previous research, which suggests that such cultures prioritize strategies that facilitate face-saving (Ting-Toomey, 1988).

Collectivistic cultures, which prioritize the precedence of group needs over individual desires, tend to prefer a compromise strategy (Hofstede, 1980; Hofstede, 1983). An additional noteworthy finding pertains to collaborating preferences across cultures. Contrary to Blake and Mouton's (1964) claim, collectivistic cultures demonstrate a greater inclination towards collaborating than individualistic cultures by more than half a standard deviation (Holt & DeVore, 2005). This is particularly interesting given that Blake and Mouton (1964) previously claimed that managers from collectivistic regions, such as South America and Japan, were among the least likely to adopt a collaborative style (Holt & Devore, 2005; Dena, 1994). Collectivistic cultures prioritize the creation of "win-win" scenarios, suggesting a more collaborative approach to conflict resolution.

The Chequered Record of Compromise in America's Political History

It is noteworthy that Washington has not always been broken. Historically, there have been "great" and historic compromises in Washington. The "Great Compromise" of the 1787 Constitutional Convention is one of those instances. It settled the chaotic debate between states with larger populations advocating for congressional representation based on population and smaller states insisting on equal representation. This compromise not only established the bicameral structure of Congress, comprising the House of Representatives and the Senate, but also set a foundational precedent for congressional representation that remains in effect to this day, including the Electoral College system in presidential elections (Onion, 2018). This agreement, commonly referred to as the Sherman Compromise or the Connecticut Compromise, adeptly synthesized elements from both the Virginia Plan, which represented the interests of larger states, and the New Jersey Plan, which aimed to protect the rights of smaller states. This compromise was crucial in shaping the framework of the United States Congress, striking a balance between representation based on population and equal representation for each state.

The "Three-Fifths Compromise" is another monumental compromise in American political history. One of the challenges at the 1787 Constitutional Convention was determining the status of enslaved individuals: should they be classified as "inhabitants" with rights or treated as "property," similar to livestock? The debate quickly intensified, and amid growing tensions, the Convention seemed on the brink of disarray. Fortunately, through the leadership of James Wilson of Pennsylvania and Charles Pinckney of South Carolina, the delegates arrived at a compromise. This compromise stipulated that enslaved individuals, described in Federalist #54 as having a "mixed character of persons and property," would be counted as three-fifths of a free individual for representation purposes. The Three-Fifths Compromise aided in the drafting and eventual ratification of the Constitution by nine of the thirteen states in the union (Valsania, 2023).

Similarly, the Missouri Compromise of 1820 addressed the issue of slavery in the new state. When Missouri sought admission as a state in the Union in 1818, a significant and contentious debate erupted regarding the inclusion of a slave state. To resolve the dispute and avert the potential onset of disunion, Speaker of the House Henry Clay advocated for a compromise. This compromise allowed the continuation of slavery in Missouri while also facilitating the admission of Maine as a free state. This legislative agreement established a dividing line at the 36th parallel, effectively partitioning the nation into territories designated for free labor and

those designated for slavery (Valsania, 2023). In contemporary times, there have been significant compromises, including the Task Reform Act of 1986, the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act of 2010, and several agreements to raise the United States' sovereign debt limit.

The outcome of many of these compromises exemplifies the reality that compromises, regardless of their ethical implications, are frequently employed to address complex and seemingly insurmountable issues, albeit at a substantial moral and social cost. Compromise fails in principled conflicts, but collaborative, principled, problem-solving conflict resolution succeeds (Jandt, 2025). Principled conflicts arise when parties are unwilling to compromise their core values or beliefs. Even with parties' willingness to compromise in the United States, the likely outcome of the compromising style of conflict is a lose-lose (Jandt, 2025, p. 56). When parties in a compromise resolution accept a proposal that falls short of their values and beliefs, they effectively accept a loss. The gain that compromise brings in such situations is what Jandt (2025, p. 56) calls "an end to conflict for now."

The compromise strategy is effective in moderately important situations where time is limited or when the parties have equal power (Pollack, 2025). However, the partisan differences in Washington are not always of moderate importance, and time is never limited. Some issues, such as abortion and reproductive health, are matters of life and death. They require a deeper level of bipartisan commitment, collaboration, and engagement than what a compromise approach can offer. Compromise addresses issues at their surface levels without confronting their underlying causes, making it what Pollack (2025) calls a stopgap measure rather than a lasting fix. This is evident in Washington's approach to the recurring debt ceiling conflicts, which have frequently led to government shutdowns. Instead of rolling up their sleeves and engaging in genuine, collaborative problem-solving, the major political parties adopt a compromise strategy involving partisan tradeoffs, merely kicking the can of conflict further down the road.

The Rugged but Optimal Path of Collaboration

Unlike compromise, which often results in a partial, zero-sum, distributive outcome, collaboration ensures that both parties in conflict fully meet their needs through the proper integration of interests. However, to integrate their interests, parties must be willing and able to engage in principled and synergistic problem-solving. They must be prepared to make the conflict even more complex to create value before claiming it. Accomplishing this requires building and maintaining trust while being sensitive to each other's needs and concerns. With such cooperation, parties can develop creative solutions that provide each party with 100% satisfaction, rather than a 50/50 or other distributive configurations of their needs.

The collaboration approach is unique among conflict-handling strategies. It emphasizes engaging all parties in a principled pursuit of an optimally mutually beneficial resolution. When effectively implemented, collaboration yields a genuine win-win outcome for all stakeholders involved. This strategy prioritizes the comprehensive identification and fulfillment of each party's needs, aiming to achieve solutions beyond mere compromise. In collaboration, participants actively share ideas, explore a range of potential solutions, cultivate relationships, and collectively seek outcomes that benefit all parties. Collaboration epitomizes problem-solving at its most effective, employing a set of guiding principles to align the diverse interests of all involved in a cooperative endeavor. Unlike compromise, which merely splits the difference or reaches a middle ground, collaboration delves deeper to uncover each party's underlying needs, interests, and concerns.

Despite their shared attributes, it is vital to distinguish collaboration from compromise. Both strategies yield some benefits for the involved parties; however, their fundamental differences are more pronounced. In compromise, each party concedes a significant element of value to reach a middle ground. Conversely, collaboration involves a cooperative effort to devise a creative solution that minimizes the need for substantial sacrifices, thereby enhancing the potential for mutual satisfaction and strengthening relationships.

For followers of politics, especially in the United States, the term "compromise" has become almost synonymous with partisan Washington. As Jandt (2025, p. 58) rightly observed, "while compromising is easily understood in the United States, collaborating is not." It is common to hear politicians from both parties express their frustrations with compromise and lament how it has, regrettably, become a dirty word in Washington. For these politicians, resolving conflicts between the two major parties or between the executive and legislative branches of government is almost always about the quest for compromise; however, as Jandt (2025, p. 56) noted, "sometimes, though, a rush to compromise limits more creative problem-solving."

A staff writer at the Collaborative Professionals of Washington expressed frustration with the partisan gridlock, "the posturing and finger-pointing in Washington, D.C.," and blamed it on Washington's compromise mode. Washington continually engages in "a settlement in which each side gives up some demand or makes concessions," which is how Webster's New World Dictionary defines compromise. So, with all that compromise, why is Washington still broken and dysfunctional? Today's Democrats, Republicans, Independents, and Libertarians do not agree on much of anything. From abortion to the size of government, taxes, the debt ceiling, immigration, budgetary cuts, national debt, and whether a senator can take a sip of water during a floor speech, partisan Washington cannot agree. Because the political parties are fundamentally divided on many issues, compromise, by its definition and essence, does not work. It does not work because it means giving up some deeply held values and beliefs that the parties are unwilling to do (CPW staff, 2013). Little wonder that compromise-driven resolutions often collapse in Washington, driving parties back into conflict with greater intensity. Like many disputes, those in Washington are rooted in principles firmly anchored in values.

Compromise often results in a "lose-lose" outcome, where each party is forced to give up specific interests, leaving fundamental issues unresolved and creating resentment. In contrast, collaboration aims to find solutions that fully address the needs of all stakeholders, resulting in a win-win, mutually beneficial outcome. By promoting open dialogue, encouraging the consideration of diverse viewpoints, and inspiring creative problem-solving, collaboration can reveal innovative ideas and improve mutual understanding among those involved. By prioritizing collaboration over compromise, Washington can transcend superficial solutions, thereby establishing a foundation for enduring, positive relationships and effective conflict resolution.

A 2022 study by the Niagara Institute analyzed the responses of 716 professionals across 36 countries, revealing significant insights into preferences for workplace conflict resolution. The findings indicated that nearly 60 percent (59.8%) of respondents favored a collaborative approach for resolving conflicts in the workplace, suggesting a strong inclination toward engagement and cooperation. In contrast, the compromise style was a distant second, endorsed by only 24.4 percent of participants. Moreover, the survey revealed that 60 percent of respondents prioritize ensuring that all parties feel heard and valued, underscoring the importance of working collaboratively toward mutually beneficial solutions during conflicts.

Conversely, only 21 percent of the respondents indicated that their primary focus is achieving a compromise.

Additionally, the study underscored respondent professionals' willingness to engage in difficult conversations: 81 percent expressed confidence in their ability to navigate challenging discussions if it would facilitate a resolution conducive to a win-win outcome for all parties involved. Perhaps the most noteworthy finding is that 67 percent of respondents demonstrated a commitment to maintaining dialogue, even in difficult conversations, until a satisfactory resolution is achieved. This willingness to persist in conversations highlights the potential for a collaborative conflict resolution strategy in professional settings, such as Washington. Successful bipartisan collaborations in American politics demonstrate the capacity of opposing parties to identify common ground and work collaboratively to address pressing issues, resulting in meaningful legislation and policy outcomes. Prominent examples of such collaboration include the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Endangered Species Act of 1973, the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, and the CHIPS Act of 2022, as well as the Inflation Reduction Act of 2022, alongside various bipartisan initiatives relating to national security and economic policy. Historically, during the Great Depression, Congress exhibited significant bipartisan unity in support of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's reform agenda, exemplifying the potential for swift legislative action during periods of crisis. Notable legislators such as Senator Lisa Murkowski (R-AK) and the late Senator John McCain (R-AZ) have garnered a substantial proportion of bipartisan cosponsors for their proposed legislation. These instances demonstrate the effectiveness of collaboration as a means of addressing complex societal challenges.

The Forked Path to Collaboration

The dilemma for parties in conflict who need to negotiate a resolution is whether to be hard or soft. The party that adopts the soft approach seeks an amicable resolution, avoids personal conflict, and readily makes concessions to the other party to reach an agreement (Fisher et al., 1991, p. 13). The risk, however, is that soft parties often get exploited by the other party and become bitter, resentful, and uncooperative. On the other hand, the party that adopts the hard approach treats negotiation as a zero-sum contest of wills, where the party that plays hardball, assumes more extreme positions, and holds out longer secures better deals. The risk in the hard approach is that two can play that game. In their desperate drive to win, the hard bargainer often provokes an equally hard response from the other party, which exhausts the hard bargainer, drains their resources, and hurts their relationship with the other side (Fisher et al., 1991, p. 13).

Soft and hard approaches represent two extremes in conflict resolution strategies. The accommodator and the avoider take the soft approach, while the competing strategy adopts the hard approach. Each approach, including the compromising one, involves some trade-off between getting what one party wants and getting along with the other. They do not yield optimal results for the parties involved. Collaboration is neither hard nor soft; it encompasses both. It combines soft and hard elements in an integrative, principled, problem-solving approach to negotiation and conflict resolution. It is tough on the issues but gentle on the people. In a collaborative and principled approach to conflict resolution, parties cooperate to resolve issues based on their merits rather than through a contest of wills, power, resources, or authority. Parties engage in a joint search for mutual gains whenever possible. When parties' interests conflict, they adopt fair and objective standards that are independent of either party's will or authority to resolve them. Collaboration allows parties to achieve what is due to them

in negotiation and other conflict resolution methods without being unpleasant or indecent. A party in a collaborative engagement can be fair (soft) to the other party without being exploited for doing so.

Collaboration is, by far, the most effective strategy for conflict resolution, particularly when circumstances allow its implementation. This approach not only addresses the immediate conflict but also fosters unity and alignment among the parties involved. In the absence of such alignment, organizations and individuals may find themselves caught in a continuous cycle of conflict management, similar to the game of "whack-a-mole," where new disagreements arise as soon as others are resolved (Richards, 2023). Therefore, promoting collaborative processes can lead to more sustainable resolutions and a more cohesive environment. What makes collaboration unique is that it is the only approach that meets Fisher et al (1991) three criteria for fairly judging a method of negotiation: (1) it should produce a wise agreement if agreement is possible; (2) it should be efficient; and (3) it should improve or at least not damage the relationship between the parties (15). A wise agreement meets the legitimate interests of each party to the extent possible, resolves conflicting interests fairly, is durable, and considers community interests (Fisher et al., 1991, p. 15).

When conflicting parties adopt the compromise strategy, the back-and-forth of position-taking tends to lock them into those positions. To maintain their positions, parties clarify and defend them against attacks. The effort spent on this welds parties to those positions, as ego interferes with reason, thus making any wise agreement impossible. If an agreement is reached, it is one that mechanically splits the difference between the parties' final positions, also known as a compromise agreement, instead of a principled, interest-based solution that meets the parties' underlying concerns and legitimate interests (Fisher et al., 1991).

The process that produces a compromise agreement is inefficient because bargaining, by its nature, creates incentives for parties to engage in stalling behaviors to extract concessions from one another. Positional bargainers begin with an extreme opening offer, stubbornly cling to it, mislead the other party about the true nature of their offer, and make minimal and incremental concessions merely to keep the negotiation alive. Due to the tricks, deceptions, posturing, stalling, threats, highballs, lowballs, and other tactics employed in positional bargaining to reach a compromise, the parties' relationship suffers, thereby failing the third test of a fair process: amicability. Collaboration helps avoid the pitfalls of compromise. It is not about being hard, soft, or nice; it is about changing the game entirely. Fisher et al (1991) state that four basic points help to change the game.

Every conflict involves the parties, their interests, the options available to them, and the criteria for selecting an option. When parties adopt a collaborative approach, they see themselves first as people who are different individuals separate from the problems they face. So, they separate the people from the problem. This separation allows them to concentrate on their shared interests instead of being driven by problem-oriented positions. Through the collaborative identification of their interests, they can jointly generate a variety of possibilities, rather than relying on a single 'right' solution dictated by the party with greater leverage. Any option presented is then evaluated against some objective standard (Shonk, 2025). Collaboration is the conflict resolution approach that achieves a win-win outcome for the parties, maintains their relationships, and builds and sustains trust. It is employed when parties seek a lasting agreement that mutually benefits them over time (Lares, 2018).

Successful collaboration within organizations necessitates a foundational framework of trust, open communication, and a mutual understanding of shared objectives (De Dreu et al., 2006).

Therefore, organizations must invest in comprehensive training programs that equip individuals with essential conflict resolution skills while fostering a culture that prioritizes collaboration over competition (Druckman & Robinson, 1998). Building trust and strong interpersonal relationships is a time-consuming endeavor (Bazerman & Neale, 1992; Ferrin et al., 2011; Fulmer & Gelfand, 2012). This requires organizations to allocate sufficient time for team-building activities, effective communication efforts, and conflict resolution processes. Such collaborative initiatives often demand a significant cultural transformation. Promoting a culture that values collaboration, encourages open communication, and upholds mutual respect is critical for achieving sustained success (Mahoney & Chi, 2001). Key elements of this cultural shift include fostering a shared sense of purpose, encouraging psychological safety, and celebrating achievements derived from collaborative efforts.

Actionable measures to facilitate this transformation include establishing ground rules for respectful dialogue, promoting active listening, and focusing on shared interests rather than entrenched positions or personal attacks (Lopez-Fresno & Savolainen, 2018). Training programs should emphasize the importance of attentive listening to help team members appreciate diverse perspectives and identify common ground (Baber, 2022). Furthermore, it is essential to recognize and celebrate teams and individuals who demonstrate exemplary collaborative skills and contribute effectively to conflict resolution. By implementing these strategies, organizations can foster an environment that promotes collaboration, innovation, improved problem-solving capabilities, and enhanced team cohesion.

The Intercultural Reach of Collaboration

In a research study examining the relative effectiveness of the five conflict management styles (compromise, accommodation, competing, avoiding, and collaboration) through a survey of 345 Indian managers in the steel and paper industries, Samantara (2004, p. 298) found that collaboration (confrontation or problem-solving) was the most effective in achieving organizational "productivity, adaptability, and flexibility". Interestingly, compromise did not rank second in that study; accommodation (smoothing) did. Individuals and organizations that adopt a collaborative (confrontational) style in conflict maintain effective interpersonal relations (Blake & Mouton, 1964). The managers involved in these studies utilized collaboration to resolve conflicts with their subordinates to the greatest extent possible, relying less on compromise, accommodation, competing, and avoiding.

Another study by Lawrence and Lorsch (1967) is even more revealing in this respect. They examined the conflict style in six organizations and discovered that the two highest-performing organizations utilized collaboration significantly more than the other four. They also found that leaders and managers in the midlevel-performing organizations adopted collaboration significantly more than those in the bottom-performing organizations. The significance of these findings lies in the strong correlation between organizational effectiveness and managers' use of collaboration as a conflict resolution style.

A further significance of the study's findings is that the absence of accommodation (a more passive form of conflict resolution) and the presence of competing as a backup mode (to collaboration) were also significantly correlated with organizational effectiveness. It can be argued that accommodation and compromise are conceptual cousins in the family of conflict styles, with accommodation being a more passive form of conflict resolution. Therefore, if the absence of accommodation and the presence of competing as a backup mode to collaboration correlate significantly with organizational effectiveness, then so too would the absence of compromise and the presence of competing as a backup to collaboration.

Even more compelling in demonstrating the superiority of collaboration over compromise as conflict styles, in their correlations with organizational effectiveness, is Burke's (1970) empirical study that examined the five methods of resolving conflicts using the Blake and Mouton (1964) schema. The study focused on the relationship between superiors and subordinates in two variable areas: (1) the constructive use of differences and disagreements, and (2) planning job targets and evaluating accomplishments. The study found that avoiding (withdrawing) and competing (forcing) behaviors were negatively related to these two variables; compromise was unrelated to any of the variables; accommodating (smoothing) was usually, but not consistently, positively related to the two variables; however, collaboration (confrontation and problem-solving) was always positively related to the two dependent variables.

Although Thomas (1971), Aram et al. (1971), and Walton and Dutton (1969) did not focus on compromise, their findings demonstrate the effectiveness of collaboration. Thomas's (1971) study found that collaboration and accommodating behaviors by inter-departmental counterparts positively correlated with managers' satisfaction in inter-departmental negotiations, while competing and avoiding produced negative correlations. Walton and Dutton (1969) discovered that managers who adopted a competitive approach in their inter-departmental relations experienced significant frustration and anxiety. In contrast, Aram et al. (1971) found that team collaboration was positively associated with several measures of member self-actualization and well-being (see also Samantara, 2004).

Samantara's (2004) study was emphatic in its conclusions that "problem-solving is the most effective method of conflict resolution" (311) and that there "seems to be irrefutable evidence…[from] multiple regression results [that] indicate that the problem-solving mode of managing conflicts is the most effective one." (313). The same study observed, as part of its implications for managers, that: "…managers are frequently making compromises with their subordinates in resolving differences or disputes. However, it has been demonstrated that the compromising mode affects creativity, innovation, or any significant improvement in organizational performance. Therefore, a reduction in managerial dependence on utilization of this strategy is called for." (314). These findings are not isolated; the results of previous studies corroborate them (see Burke, 1970; Sharma & Samantara, 1994).

Speaking of the intercultural reach of collaboration, it is important to acknowledge that studies indicate trust, a crucial factor in collaboration, shows significant variations in both quality and quantity across different cultural contexts (Fulmer & Gelfand, 2012). For instance, individuals from Western cultures typically operate under the assumption that others will demonstrate trustworthiness. In contrast, individuals from various non-Western cultures, especially those in East and South Asia, often approach trust with greater skepticism or initial suspicion (Lewicki & Polin, 2013). These cross-cultural disparities in trust perception can create substantial barriers to effective collaboration between local and international organizations and networks (Fang, 2011; Lopez-Fresno et al., 2018). This underscores the critical need for a nuanced understanding of cultural influences in collaboration.

Implications for Conflict Resolution and Its Practice

In appropriate contexts, prioritizing collaboration over compromise in conflict resolution provides practitioners with a robust framework for building better relationships and achieving sustainable outcomes. Although compromise serves as a practical mechanism for resolving specific conflicts, it often leads to partial dissatisfaction among the parties involved. It may not fully address the underlying issues that caused the conflict. In contrast, collaboration focuses

on exploring solutions that meet the needs of all stakeholders, thus promoting greater satisfaction and a stronger sense of shared ownership.

This approach not only builds trust and enhances communication but also fosters a more positive and productive environment. When individuals feel truly heard and understood, with their needs genuinely addressed, they are more likely to be satisfied with the resolution and to trust the conflict resolution process. Moreover, collaboration encourages participants to move beyond conventional thinking, leading to innovative solutions that might not arise through compromise.

By nurturing open dialogue and mutual respect, collaboration can strengthen relationships among parties, making it easier to navigate future conflicts. Addressing the root causes of discord through collaborative means increases the chances of long-term resolutions and reduces the likelihood of similar issues recurring. This shift has significant implications for both the field of conflict resolution and its practitioners.

Collaboration requires shifting the focus from power dynamics and resource allocation to a deeper understanding of the needs and interests of all parties involved. Practitioners must possess advanced facilitation and communication skills to effectively navigate collaborative processes, promote open dialogue, and facilitate the resolution of disputes, ultimately helping parties reach a consensus. Although collaboration may require a greater investment of time and resources compared to compromise, such investment is vital for effective communication and brainstorming.

Practitioners need to understand the complexities of collaboration, including the importance of trust-building, active listening, and creative problem-solving. By demonstrating collaborative behaviors and educating others about its benefits, practitioners can play a crucial role in cultivating a culture of collaboration within organizations and communities. Overall, adopting collaboration instead of compromise can significantly improve the practice of conflict resolution by fostering more sustainable and satisfying outcomes, strengthening interpersonal relationships, and creating a more positive and productive environment. However, this paradigm shift also demands that practitioners develop new skills, commit additional time and resources, and gain a deep understanding of the dynamics involved in collaborative processes.

CONCLUSION

Peace is not a game. Conflicts involve people's lives. An approach to resolving conflict that offers only an end to conflict 'for now' is not a great approach, especially when another method provides a more enduring and sustainable resolution. While compromise may initially seem efficient and offer temporary solutions, the true power of collaboration lies in its ability to foster lasting, mutually beneficial outcomes and strengthen relationships by emphasizing shared goals and comprehensive understanding. This highlights the advantages of collaboration as a method for resolving conflicts.

The significance of collaboration, as opposed to compromise, lies in its capacity to yield win-win solutions that comprehensively fulfill the needs of all parties involved. In contrast, compromise often ends in "lose-lose" outcomes, in which the interests and desires of neither party are fully addressed. Compromise necessitates concessions from both sides in pursuit of a mutually acceptable resolution, yet this often results in neither party achieving its primary objectives. The outcomes of compromise can be dissatisfying, as both parties may perceive that they have given up goals that are important to them, potentially fostering feelings of resentment or discontent with the resolution. The temporary respite that compromise provides

does not typically resolve the root causes of the conflict, which may lead to the reemergence of issues in the future. When compromise is employed habitually, it could undermine trust and engender feelings of being undervalued or unheard among participants.

While compromise may serve as an expedient mechanism for addressing minor disputes under time constraints, it often falls short of fully resolving conflicts. In contrast, collaboration presents the opportunity for deeper and more satisfying solutions, which not only address the immediate concerns but also enhance interpersonal and intergroup relationships and promote a more cooperative and inclusive work environment.

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