INFLUENCE OF INDIVIDUAL CHARACTERISTICS ON CONFLICT MANAGEMENT STYLE IN AN ORGANIZATIONAL SETTING

Aruna A. R[*]

Abstract

For any organization to be effective and efficient in achieving its goals, the people in the organization need to have a shared vision of what they are striving to achieve, as well as clear objectives for each team / department and individual. It also needs ways of recognizing and resolving conflict amongst people, so that conflict does not become so serious that co-operation is impossible. This study is therefore to identify the conflict management style predominantly followed and the how the individual characteristic of employees influence their conflict handling style. The study is based on a survey conducted with the help of a questionnaire. It was found that collaborating was the predominant style of resolving conflict . It was also found that age, gender and experience do not have any association with predominant conflict handling style. Female respondents prefer Collaborating style and compromising style. Men tend to avoid conflicts than women. Officer cadre employees prefer competing style and avoiding style of conflict resolution while illiterate workers prefer collaborating style. People with experience of 31-40 yrs are highly collaborating and compromising

Keywords: Conflict, Conflict management, Conflict handling style

[*] **Assistant Professor, St.Peter's College of Engineering and Technology, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India**

Introduction:

Conflict may be defined as a struggle or contest between people with opposing needs, ideas, beliefs, values, or goals. Conflict is a natural, everyday phenomenon in all private and working spheres. Within organizations conflicts are inevitable, and arise in case of disagreements over workloads, problems in communication, individual differences in needs, wants, goals, values, opinions, preferences or behaviors, as well as in case of disputes between employees/unions and employers. Explicitly, as human beings interact in organizations, differing values and situations create tension.

In the 1930s and 1940s, conflict was viewed as an undesirable phenomenon. However, that traditional viewpoint of conflict gave way to the behavioral viewpoint of the 1960s in which conflict was seen as an inevitable fact of organizational life to be recognized and addressed and to the contemporary interactionist viewpoint, in which conflict is viewed as potentially useful to energize a company, point out problems and unify a group. Conflict is today not considered to be a bad thing anymore

Opposite to the "conflict avoidance" perspective of traditionalists, the "conflict management" perspective of interactionists recognizes that while conflict does have associated costs, it can also bring great benefits. Properly managed, it can be a creative force for the business and the individual, because if we regard differences of opinion as valuable sources of cross-fertilization, they begin to enrich our experience. In other words, conflict presents exciting possibilities about the future (if managed in a positive, constructive fashion5), because difficult situations and relationships are said to be the ones that make people grow. Channeling conflict in a positive or negative way may affect the nature of the conflict whether beneficial or destructive. If not managed properly, conflicts can result in bad feelings, high turnover and costly litigation, and are said to be one of the most difficult challenges organizational members face and one of the most frustrating and uncomfortable experiences for managers. At the most serious levels conflicts can bring teams, departments and sometimes whole organizations to a virtual standstill. Quite the opposite, when conflict is recognized, acknowledged and managed in proper manner, personal and organizational benefits accrue

Conflict handling styles

When people find themselves in conflict, their behavior can be described in terms of where it lies along two independent dimensions

- assertiveness - Degree to which you try to satisfy your own concerns,
- Cooperativeness - Degree to which you try to satisfy the other person's concerns.

The figure 1 shows the five interpersonal styles of conflict management that result from various combinations of the assertiveness and cooperativeness.

Figure 1 : Conflict handling styles

- _Collaborating_ - Conflicting parties jointly identify the problem, weigh and choose a solution.
- _Accommodating_ - Playing down differences while emphasizing commonalties.
- _Competing_ - Shows high concern for self-interest and less concern for the other's interest. Encourages 'I win, you lose' tactics.
- _Avoiding_ - Either passive withdrawal from the problem or active suppression of the issue.
- _Compromising_ - A give-and-take approach involving moderate concern for both self and others. Each party has to give up something of value. It may include external or third party intervention

LITERATURE REVIEW

During the past few decades researchers have taken a keen interest in conflict in the workplace and its impact on organisations. Amongst others, studies were conducted on interpersonal conflict-handling styles (Jehn 1997; Fillbeck & Smith, 1997; Neale & Northcraft, 1999), conflict resolution strategies (Van De Vliert & Euwema, 1994), conflict and justice (Ohbuchi, Suzuki &

Hayashi, 2001), theories of managing conflict (Rahim, 2002), conflict of interests and objectives (Vilaseca, 2002) and managing constructive (functional) and destructive (dysfunctional) conflict (Jehn, 1995; Pelled, Eisenhardt & Xin, 1999). It seems from literature that conflict management strategies or techniques have been studied systematically (Havenga, 2005).

Rahim (2002) suggested that conflict management strategies should involve recognition of the different types of conflict which may have a positive or negative impact on individual and group performance. Dimensions of conflict which are useful for conflict management include: task and emotional conflict (Ross & Ross, 1989); cognitive and affective conflict (Amason, 1996) and task and relationship conflicts (John, 1997). Affective and substantive conflict account for differential effects in organisations and also affect the management of interpersonal conflict within the work environment (Jehn, 1995; Pearson, Ensley & Amason, 2002) According to Rahim (2002) the two dimensions of conflict, substantive and affective, are positively correlated which means that in the process of enchaining substantive conflicts, affective conflict may also be increased.

One of the problems of managing conflict, as suggested by Applebaum, Abadallah & Shapiro (1999) is that managers spend 20% of their time resolving conflict. Recognition of the different types, as well as the dimensions of conflict in the workplace is valuable in managing conflict. However, being aware of the extent of conflict at various levels of an organisation and of the various conflict-handling styles is crucial for understanding the management of organisational conflict (Rahim 1986). What became evident from the literature survey is that almost all studies concentrate on conflict, whether generic or in a work environment, in organisations and groups not linked to small businesses. Very few conflict studies have been conducted in small- and medium- sized enterprise environments. These environments, according to Havenga (2005) are closely knit and have an impact on the behaviour of individuals that may differ from that in larger organisations.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:

• To identify the dominant conflict management style

- To study differences in preferred conflict styles according to gender, age and job position in an organizational setting

RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS:

In order to develop a further understanding of organizational conflict, the following research questions are posed:

RQ 1: Which conflict handling style is used predominantly by employees to resolve disputes that occur in organizational setting?

RQ 2: Are conflict handling styles used to resolve disputes in organizational setting related to employees' demographic and work characteristics, precisely their gender, age, designation and experience?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research approach:

Quantitative approach was followed in this exploratory study. The primary data was generated using a standardised instrument in a field survey design. The survey contained questions regarding demographic information to determine the characteristics of the participants, information about the participant's work experience, and organizational status. It also contains 25 items that uses a 5-point Likert scale to assess respondent's conflict handling style.

The sample was selected to cover respondents of different age groups, gender and job positions were included. From the total of 136 responses received, data from 120 respondents were usable. The following depicts their profile

Table 1 Profile of Sample

Variable	Distribution in %
Gender	Male (91.8%), Female (8.2%)
Age	30 to 40yrs (4.1%), 41-50yrs (53.1 %.), 51-60 (42.9%)
Designation	Illiterate Worker (54.1%), literate Worker (18.4%), Staff (11.2%), Officer (16.3%)
Experience	Less than 20yrs (11.2 %), 20 to 30yrs (70.4%), 30-40 yrs (18.4%)

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Except descriptive statistics calculations (mean values, standard deviations, cross tabulations), in order to assess the relationship between respondents' characteristics and their conflict handling styles, as well as to determine the significant findings related to different variables, chi-square tests (χ^2), one-way ANOVA analysis (F tests), independent samples t-tests, and Pearson correlation coefficients were utilized. Calculations and tests were conducted using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

RESULTS OF THE STUDY:

Dominant conflict handling style among the employees

It can be seen from the graph below that the dominant style of conflict resolution used by employees is Collaborating (42.9%) and second dominant conflict resolution is compromising (33.7%)

Figure 2: Conflict handling style
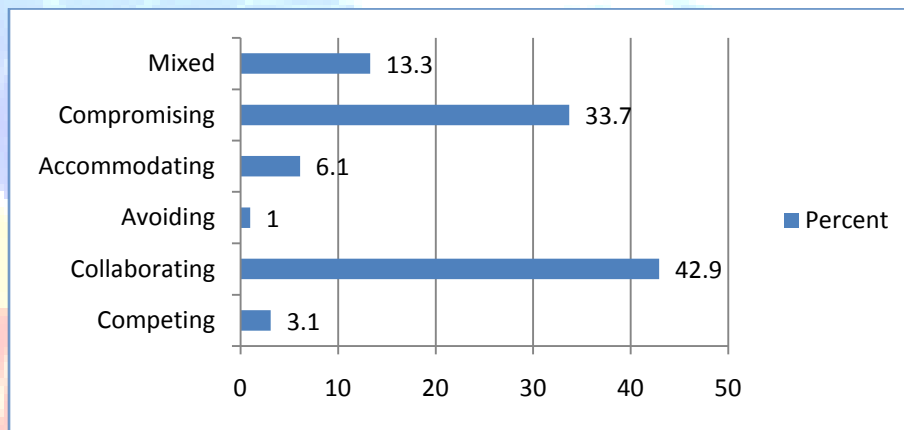
In order to find whether collaborating is certainly the dominant conflict handling style among the employees, we looked at the major conflict handling style of different subgroups of respondents and the results are as follows

Table 2 Individual Characteristics and Conflict handling style

Individual characteristics	Sub groups	Dominant Conflict handling strategy		Second most frequently used conflict handling style	
		Type	% of respondents	Type	% of respondents
Gender	Male	Collaborating	44.4%	Compromising	33.3%

	Female	Compromising	37.5	Collaborating	25%
Age	30 to 40yrs	Collaborating	25%	Compromising	23%
	41-50yrs	Compromising	42.3%	Collaborating	32.7%
	51-60	Collaborating	57.4%	Compromising	23.8%
Designation	Illiterate Worker	Collaborating	47.2%	Compromising	37.7%
	Literate Worker	Collaborating	5.%	Compromising	22.2%
	Staff	Collaborating	54.5%	Competing	9.1%
	Officer	Compromising	50%	Accommodating	25%
Experience	Less than 20yrs	Collaborating	54.5%	Compromising	27.3%
	20 to 30yrs	Compromising	37.7%	Collaborating	36.2%
	30-40 yrs	Collaborating	61.1%	Compromising	22.2%

From the table 1, we can see that collaborating is the most predominant used strategy for conflict resolution and next predominant strategy used is compromising.

Relationship between individual characteristics and conflict handling style

In order to identify whether dominant conflict management style differ with employee's gender, age, experience and job position, Chi-square analysis was done. It was found that there was no Significant association found between respondent's age, gender and experience and their predominant style of handling conflict. But there was significant relationship between respondent's job position and dominant style of handling conflict which is shown in table below

Table 3 Conflict handling style and Job Position

	Chi Square value	P value

Conflict handling style and Job Position	33.960	0.003

Since p value <0.05 (df = 15), we can say there exists a significant association between job position of respondents and their dominant conflict management style.

To identify whether gender influence the choice of conflict handling style, One way Anova was done.

Table 4 Influence of gender on Conflict handling style

Conflict handling style	n	Gender	Mean	F- ratio	p-value
Competing	120	Male	13.05	2.139	0.147
		Female	10.88		
Collaborating	120	Male	21.30	8.598	0.004*
		Female	23.75		
Avoiding	120	Male	8.20	8.299	0.005*
		Female	5.37		
Accommodating	120	Male	19.02	2.365	0.127
		Female	20.37		
Compromising	120	Male	21.20	8.071	0.005*
		Female	23.87		

We can see from the above table that men and women differ significantly (p<0.05) in the usage of Collaborating, Avoiding and Compromising style of handling conflict. We can also see that Female respondents have more inclination to Collaborating style and compromising style when compared to male respondents. Men prefer to avoid conflicts than women.

While studying whether age of respondents have bearing on the choice of conflict handling style, it was found that age do not significantly influence the choice of conflict handling style.

An attempt was made to identify the influence of job position on usage of conflict handling style and the results are as follows

Table 5: Influence of job position on Conflict handling style

Conflict handling style	n	Job position	Mean	F- ratio	p-value
Competing	120	Worker - Illiterate	11.5849	15.396	0.000*
		Worker - Literate	12.9444		
		Staff	11.5455		
		Officer	18.0000		
Collaborating	120	Worker - Illiterate	22.1321	7.442	0.000*
		Worker - Literate	21.2222		
		Staff	22.0909		
		Officer	19.3125		
Avoiding	120	Worker - Illiterate	7.3962	5.358	0.002*
		Worker - Literate	7.6111		
		Staff	7.9091		
		Officer	10.3125		
Accommodating	120	Worker - Illiterate	19.3585	1.463	0.709
		Worker - Literate	19.1111		
		Staff	18.5455		
		Officer	18.8125		
Compromising	120	Worker - Illiterate	22.0189	2.097	0.106
		Worker - Literate	20.5556		
		Staff	20.9091		
		Officer	20.7500		

We can see from the table 5, job position ($p<0.05$) influences the choice of Competing, Avoiding and collaborating style of resolving conflict. We can also see from the above table that officer prefer competing style and avoiding style of conflict resolution while illiterate workers prefer collaborating style.

To understand the effect of age on the choice of conflict resolution style, One way Anova and the results convey that experience have bearing on choice of compromising and collaborating style of conflict resolution ($p<0.05$) which is shown in table below

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Table 6 Influence of experience on Conflict handling style

Conflict handling style	n	Experience	Mean	F- ratio	p-value
Competing	120	Less than 20 yrs	15.27	3.070	0.051
		21-30 yrs	12.85		
		31-40 yrs	11.50		
Collaborating	120	Less than 20 yrs	21.27	5.267	0.007*
		21-30 yrs	21.13		
		31-40 yrs	23.05		
Avoiding	120	Less than 20 yrs	8.18	2.547	0.084
		21-30 yrs	8.25		
		31-40 yrs	6.67		
Accommodating	120	Less than 20 yrs	19.09	2.382	0.098
		21-30 yrs	18.85		
		31-40 yrs	20.22		
Compromising	120	Less than 20 yrs	20.81	3.126	0.048*
		21-30 yrs	21.15		
		31-40 yrs	22.78		

We can also infer from above table people with experience of 31-40 yrs are highly collaborating and compromising when compared to other groups of experience which signals healthy signal of signal of conflict resolution.

Discussion

From the above analysis, we can say that the dominant style followed by employees in manufacturing concern is Collaborating style (45%) followed by compromising style (38%) for handling conflicts. We can also see that Male employees predominantly use collaborating conflict resolution style where as the female employees use compromise style. Workers (literate and illiterate), and staff follow collaborating style while the officers follow compromising style. Employees of age group 50 -60 yrs predominantly use collaborative style, 40 -50 uses

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compromising where as the conflict style followed by 30 – 40 yrs age group is spread along all styles. We can also see that only staff and officers are competing. Also, only the job position of respondents influences the dominant style of resolving conflicts.

We can also infer that age do not significantly influence the choice of conflict handling style but other individual characteristics individual partly influence the choice of conflict resolution method.

It is a rationale that organization following collaboration conflict style is stable, growing and has a comfortable level of resources and past success is not seen as reason for complacency. Hence the organization can take steps to maintain the motivation level and increase the creativity skills among employees, so that they together with organization can become more flourishing. Sense of competitiveness and goal setting may be imparted among lower level employees too. In analyzing any conflict situation, the organization can consider the Designation of employees, which has influence on the choice of conflict management style.Although the survey was based on general conflict situation, employees can be trained to adapt the conflict resolution style with respect to Level of importance of relationship, Importance of the issue, Time/ energy available to involve in conflict and Consequences of involving/ not involving in a conflict

Conclusion

Consensus on conflict management strategies could be valuable for improving workplace relations and productivity. A better understanding of the contribution of individual differences to conflict management has implications for managing human resources in organizational contexts, especially for their recruitment and selection, training and development, as well as motivating and rewarding. More to it, findings of this research could aid practitioners in fitting together the individual differences of their employees with conflict management styles they use, as well as to anticipate conflict handling behavior of their employees depending on their gender, age, and educational level, field of work, hierarchical level or family status. Finally, this research suggest that both academics and practitioners should give more attention to identifying potentially positive effects of conflict and deriving effectiveness from behavioral differences associated with diverse workforce

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