

## **EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE AS A DETERMINANT OF CONFLICT STYLE ADOPTION OF MANAGERS: A THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE**

**SMARTY MUKUNDAN\*; DR. ZAKKARIYA K.A.\*\***

\*ASST PROFESSOR

FISAT BUSINESS SCHOOL, MOOKKANNOOR  
P.O, ANGAMALY, ERNAKULAM, KERALA, INDIA.

\*\* READER, SCHOOL OF MANAGEMENT STUDIES

CUSAT,ERNAKULAM,KERALA,INDIA.

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### **ABSTRACT**

Successful management is dependent heavily on the manager's ability to handle conflict effectively. The workforce has been increasingly becoming diversified vis-à-vis the gender, culture and ethnicity. The present work environment has in itself contributed to sowing seeds of conflict with greater diversity, hostility, complexity and newer business competencies in the work context. The classic study of Mintzberg's Managerial roles approach (1973) also says that a manager has to spend sufficient time and energy in solving conflict as he has to take roles as a negotiator, and dispute handler. An understanding of the conflict and role that it plays in influencing employee behavior constructively or destructively is immense. Therefore conflict when left unmanaged can lead to diminished cohesiveness amongst employees, productivity and reduced organizational fitness. To manage conflict effective conflict resolution strategies that have constructive outcomes is called for. Conflict resolution style theorists opine that collaborative or integrative style, where there is high concern for task and people is considered to give positive individual and organizational outcomes, while the withdrawing /avoidance style and forcing / dominating style are considered to be ineffective in managing conflict. Though managers have typical preferences in the styles followed it need not necessarily be the typical response as it depends on the context, power relationships, emotions etc. The adoption of conflict styles of managers however is dependent on variables like gender orientation, cultural values, personality orientation, underlying relationships – public/private.

The paper attempts to draw the importance of managing conflicts at workplace positively and the need for effective conflict resolution strategies. The conflict style adopted and the variables that affect the adoption of each style are discussed and possible interventions at the workplace are suggested

**KEYWORDS:** Emotional Intelligence, conflict, conflict style.

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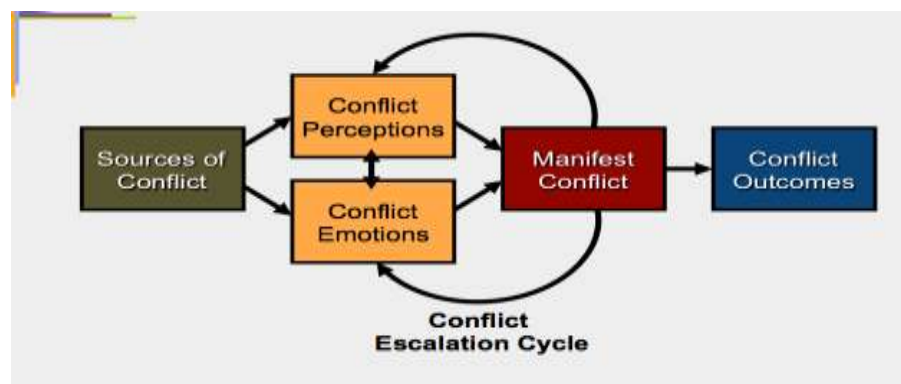
## INTRODUCTION

The workforce has been increasingly becoming diversified vis-à-vis the gender, culture and ethnicity. The present work environment has in itself contributed to sowing seeds of conflict with greater diversity, hostility, complexity and newer business competencies in the work context. The classic study of Mintzberg's Managerial roles approach (1973) has theorized ten different roles deemed as pertinent for a manager's job. Of the roles that a manager has to act out he has to spend sufficient time and energy in solving conflict as he has to play the role of a negotiator, dispute handler, resource allocator etc as mentioned in the theory. Of late there have been several trends developing at workplaces that make conflict management a topic of interest to researchers. Contemporary organizations associate themselves with employee empowerment and collaborative work resulting in greater potential for conflict (Brahnam et.al; 2004). Growing diversification of the workforce, increasing number of women in workforce are other contributing factors. The changing attitude of the theorists itself that conflict is beneficial than detrimental (McKenzie, 2002) at workplace has made this topic even more interesting. This calls for effective conflict management in organizations as conflict when left unmanaged leads to productivity issues, increased stress and 'politricks'.

### What is conflict?

Conflict has been defined as the process in which one party perceives that its interests are being thwarted/ opposed or negatively affected by another party. The conflict process can be triggered by differences in goals, values, tasks or due to inadequate resources, transparency, communication etc. There is a sequence of events in the conflict literature i.e. it begins with frustration (when at disagreement), conceptualization, behavior and outcome (Shown in Figure no:1).

**Fig:1- The conflict process**



Source: Mcshane L Steven, VonGlinow, MaryAnn, Sharma,R, Radha, Organisational Behaviour, 2008,Pg394.

This process model is heavily drawn from the Pondy (1967) and Watson (1969) model of explaining the sequence of events that lead to a conflict episode. It analyses the basic mental and interpersonal events that lead to different conflict handling styles which again is shaped by the broader parameters at the workplace which perhaps could be the norms, reward and recognition structures or standards that shape the priorities of individuals at workplace.

### **Need for effective conflict management at workplace**

As human beings interact in organizations, differing values and situations create conflicts. Modern theorists opine that when conflict is recognized, and managed in a proper manner, personal and organizational benefits are seen (Silverthorne, 2005). Though some managers see conflict as something that should be avoided at all costs which was the early school of thought (prior to the 60's), others see conflict as constructive if managed in a positive way (Darling and Fogliasso, 1990) that leads to better creativity and innovation. Today's effective manager seeks not to avoid but to manage conflict within the organization (Rahim et al., 2001) and it is in this context that we need to discuss on the conflict management at workplaces. This can be managed in such a way that there is constructive conflict and ensure that it does not escalate it into socio emotional conflict. The former also known as task related conflict where the conflict is focused on the task rather than people, while the latter ie the socio emotional /relationship conflict is a negative outcome where the differences are viewed as personal attacks rather that to resolve an issue. The persons involved tend to get defensive and hence indulge in dysfunctional behavioural manifestations like holding vital information, sabotage the efforts of the opposing party, lack of right communication patterns etc(Shane et.al;2008). Therefore conflict when left unmanaged can lead to diminished cohesiveness amongst employees, productivity and reduced organizational fitness. Hence the effect of conflict whether positive or negative depends on the person who manages it and the adoption of the right conflict resolution style

### **Conflict styles**

Conflict style refers to the style that an individual chooses to satisfy oneself or others (Womack, 1988). The early theory of conflict style resolution was one-dimensional proposed by Mary P Follet (1924) where three styles were proposed – domination compromise and integration and added two more secondary styles namely avoidance and suppression. Later, Blake and Mouton (1964) developed the managerial grid, which included two dimensions: concern for production and concern for people with four styles–forcing (low-low for both, smoothing, compromising and problem solving (high- high for both). Thomas and Kilmann (1974, 1977) based on the work of Blake and Mouton labelled two components of conflict behavior as assertiveness and cooperativeness. Assertiveness was a behavior that satisfies one's own concern, and cooperativeness was a behavior that satisfies another person's concerns. These two dimensions yield the five conflict management styles of competitiveness, accommodation, compromise, avoiding, and collaboration. This model has been one of the popular models. Pruitt(1983) suggested a dual concern model with four styles –yielding, problem solving, contending and inaction. Rahim & Bonomo (1979) came with a differentiation with two dimensions namely – concern for self and concern for others which basically portrays the motivational orientation of an individual at the time of conflict. All the styles converge with the same orientation ie concern for task and concern for people. Of these it is difficult to say which the best style is.

Conflict resolution style theorists opine that collaborative or integrative style, where there is high concern for task and people is considered to give positive individual and organizational outcomes, while the withdrawing /avoidance style and forcing / dominating style are considered to be ineffective in managing conflict. Though managers have typical preferences in the styles followed it need not necessarily be that managers follow the same style always. According to Rahim (2002) conflict resolution implies reduction, elimination or termination of conflict and

therefore can be concluded that depending on the organizational settings it varies. However there would be a style which is dominant in people (Sternberg 1984, 1987) and adoption of this style is dependent on several factors. All the above styles discuss conflict resolution in a two dimensional framework (Blake & Mouton, TKI or ROCI) which pertains to the content of the communication but there is a contention that there exists a third factor which has a relational dimension that tries to specify the character of the interaction ie emotional/relational valence (Nicotera, 1993). The researcher tries to draw attention to this three dimensional framework, where in people do get influenced by this third factor in the adoption of any particular conflict resolution style

### **Variables that influence adoption of conflict resolution style**

One of the assumptions was that that males and females have typical style adoption. Women were less competitive and more accommodating, while men would opt for competing primarily because of the way they have been socialized. There has been empirical evidence with these findings (Brewer et.al., 2002; Korabik et al., 1993). With respect to managers, these findings do not converge as much with gender role expectations. There has been mixed responses as the associated literature which tries to explain the adoption of a conflict resolution style with gender /sex as an explanatory variable has come with inconsistent findings. Recent studies also purports that it is not the biological sex that is important but the gender role orientation of being feminine or masculine. There is strong evidence that male and female manager's who are more androgynous are more willing to use constructive collaborative strategies (Brewer et al., 2002).

Yet another factor that influences the conflict resolution styles of an individual is the cultural background. Individuals from an individualistic culture tends to show a preference to the competing style, which comes as their part of manifesting a highly achievement oriented culture (Morris et al., 1998) whereas person from the collectivist culture has an inclination not to use competing style, instead use either a collaborative/integrative or compromising style (Morris et al., 1998, Rahim et al., 2002, Shih & Susanto, 2009). Avoidance is also a style adopted by Chinese managers who belong to a collectivist culture as they give a lot of importance to tradition and societal conformity (Morris et al., 1998, Rahim et al., 2002 ). A closer look into related literature reveals that adoption of conflict management styles is primarily a function of the underlying difference in value orientations. These values are in turn shaped by the way in which they are socialised, which indicate the role of personality in determining the conflict styles (Morris et al., 1998). The above fact is strengthened that personality orientation do have specific patterns in conflict resolution (Moberg, 1998). There was a strong association with the Big five Personality traits (namely extraversion, openness, conscientiousness, agreeableness and neuroticism) and the conflict style adoption. It was found that agreeableness was positively associated with the avoidance style, while conscientiousness was negatively associated with avoiding style also extraversion had a positive association with dominating style (Antonioni, 1998, Mukhtar, Habib, 2008)

A contextual factor like the type of underlying relationship is also a variable that leads to the adoption of conflict style. People respond to conflict differently depending on whether the relationship is public or personal. Individuals are likely to be more vested in personal relationships than they may be with work relationships wherein again culture has a role to play

(Claire, 2010) as the culture determines the relative importance that an individual gives in maintaining personal or public relationships.

Having discussed the above factors that may influence the resolution of conflict at workplace it can be seen that the above variables fall within the content of the two dimensional framework of conflict resolution and a third factor ie the emotional/relational valence is also an antecedent for adoption of any style. This calls in for the presence of a new form of competency called the emotional competency. This otherwise known as Emotional Intelligence (EI) of individuals is another determinant factor irrespective of the gender, personality or the culture variation that determines the success of conflict management. Mayer & Salovey (1990) identified three dimensions of EI – ability to perceive emotions, ability to use emotions and the ability to manage emotions. A fourth dimension was added ie the ability to comprehend emotions in an organizational setting. People with a high Emotional quotient are able to recognize and manage the impact of emotions on their thoughts and behavior and develop an ability to judge the social dynamics in the workplace and manage relationships within the context. Since the priority while resolving conflicts is to consider everyone's interests and adopting a win-win approach. Looking at the dimensions of EI i.e. self awareness, self regulation, empathy & social awareness it was empirically proved that these dimensions are positively associated (Rahim et al., 2002) which indicates that EI will lead to conflict resolution with positive outcomes. Therefore a person with a higher score in EI has a greater inclination to use the win-win approaches while resolving conflicts (Goleman, Boyatziz & Mc ghee, 2002, Claire, 2010, Shih & Susanto, 2009, Suliman & Al-sheikh, 2006). A win-win approach indicates that both the parties stand to gain with the resultant outcomes. As earlier mentioned this win-win approach is one where both party's interests are met and this can be done using the third and the fourth dimension proposed in the Salovey & Mayer model of EI. A person has to accurately perceive his own and others thoughts, feelings and actions *via emotion displays* which is a new ability within the model of EI. This ability consists of deciding which emotions to display to get the desired impact on others and then effectively eliciting these displays during interpersonal interactions (Cote & Hideg, 2011). Hence the person who possesses high EI would be in a better position to regulate his emotions depending on the context and use an effective strategy where one gets the correct outcome. Correct outcome results when the person interacting has been able to actually change the other person's behavior, attitudes and emotions in desired direction (Cote & Hideg, 2011). The ability and skill to counter conflict with apt feelings and emotions in a constructive manner is therefore a competence which managers need to develop at workplaces. Hence we can conclude that more than any other variables, emotional intelligence plays an important role in resolving conflict functionally. Emotionally intelligent people has the abilities to think and focus on more advantageous styles of handling conflicts as it will benefit either of the parties .

### **To conclude**

Conflict at workplaces cannot be viewed as negative; instead a moderate amount of conflict needs to be maintained at the workplace to foster creativity and innovation. Hence, in contemporary organization, the biggest challenge is to nurture a set of managers who will be able to keep the conflict at the optimum level and manage it constructively. Workplace diversity poses issues in this context but this can be overcome to an extent by imparting specific culture sensitization programs to the managers. More importantly, organizations should adopt a policy of

hiring candidates who are likely to adapt and manage conflicts constructively by thoroughly assessing their gender and personality orientation and emotional intelligence. Unlike IQ, it is found that EI can be developed. A wide range of findings from the fields of psychotherapy, training programs, and executive education (Kerry 2009) all provide evidence for people's ability to improve their social and emotional competence with sustained effort and a systematic program. In addition, new findings in the emerging field of affective neuroscience have begun to demonstrate that the brain circuitry of emotion exhibits a fair degree of plasticity, even in adulthood (Davidson, Jackson, & Kalin, 2000). A recent research on "mindfulness" training-an emotional self-regulation strategy-has also shown that training can actually alter the brain centers that regulate negative and positive emotions. (Boyatzis, Cowan, & Kolb, 1995) in their work reiterates that EI competencies can be developed with an intensive individualized competence building plan. On a personal level too, EI competencies can be developed by assessing oneself first and reflecting about oneself and regulating ones positive and negative emotions. Emotional intelligence of both the managers and subordinates can be enhanced through well formulated coherent emotional competence training. The organisations therefore may provide an enabling environment by providing appropriate reinforcements for learning and enhancing these competencies and improving it, coupled with effective communication and structural changes.

### **Directions for future research**

Developments in the emotional intelligence literature on the social effects are relatively a new dimension. Further studies linking conflict resolution & emotional intelligence, needs to be done to get a strong empirical foundation for postulating an association. The present literature gives only insights within a specific context. Resolution of conflicts and the role of emotional intelligence in shaping the attitudes and behavior of individuals at workplace are immense. There is a need for focus group discussions with managers and subordinates to understand the triggers and outcomes of each style in the organization. Laboratory experiments by controlling the extraneous variable can also be done to understand the patterns of conflict resolution styles and their linkage with the various dimensions of emotional intelligence also need to be studied. As the existing literature do not throw much light within this framework, research needs to be continued in developing a theoretical model of EI & linking it to effectiveness of social relationships in the organizational context.

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