Title: Multicultural Conflict Resolution Strategy

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Abstract

This research paper studied and investigated how the multicultural environment would impact the conflict resolution strategies. From literature review, we understood the different sources and level of conflicts. We went through the evolvement of different theoretical models for conflict resolution strategy styles to explore the relationship between cultural variables and their impact on conflict resolution strategies. From several related quantitative researches, we categorized the multicultural environment into four types and identified their preference of conflict resolution strategy styles.

Introduction

As globalization continues to gain prominence, there has been increased emphasis on cultural diversity in teams and multi-cultural teams are becoming increasingly common. Conflicts in teams, especially in multicultural teams, is inevitable. The growing diversity in teams results in diverging perspectives, and this can be a strength but at the same time be a weakness because it may give rise to conflicts within the team. For teams to flourish, there is a need for an efficient and fast method of conflict resolution. Understanding conflicts and how to resolve them is important in teams in order to bridge diverse cultural perspectives. Research studies assessing the effect of culture on conflict resolution has revealed that both individualism and collectivism plays major roles in the choice of conflict resolution style. Cultural factors also interact with personality and this interaction needs to be taken into consideration when choosing conflict resolution styles.

Research Objective and Methodology

This paper studied and analyzed different methods of conflict resolution used in multicultural teams. It explores the relationship between conflict resolution styles and culture, personality and power. The paper shows how conflict resolution strategy has evolved from cooperative-competitive dichotomy suggested by Deutsch (1949) which gave birth to the basic standard cultural variable of individualism and collectivism model by Hofstede [1] to the model developed by Rahim [2] which incorporates a horizontal vertical component, making it possible for team members to be individualistic within a group and be collectivistic while maintaining their identity as individuals. The paper uses literature review methodology from several studies to assess the how cultural variables will determine the conflict resolution strategy in a team. The paper recommends the most effective method for conflict resolution in multicultural teams based on the studies reviewed.

Literature Review

Sources of Conflict

Conflict is viewed as an incompatibility of interest which arises as a result of misalignment of goals, motivation, or actions between two parties, it can be real or perceived [3]. Although conflict is often viewed as negative, it can also result in positive effects. Apart from causing disagreements, reduced productivity, stress and decreased cooperation as well as negative emotions, conflict can stimulate needed change within a group, improve decision making and stimulate critical thinking and can be seen as a necessary growth procedure [4]. Conflict is classified based on the

conditions responsible for the disagreement, and this classification leads to a better insight into the nature of conflicts. Based on this style of classification by Rahim [2], ten types of conflicts are identified

1. **Affective conflict:** This type of conflict arises as a result of incompatibility between two social entities working together. It is also called relationship or interpersonal conflict and is often driven by negative emotions. Emotions produce different physiological, behavioral and cognitive changes and are said to control and direct human behavior. As a result, it can provide the energy that fuels conflicts [5].
2. **Substantive conflict:** This form of conflict occurs when team members are not in agreement on how to complete a task. It is also called task conflict and occurs as a result of difference in viewpoints or opinions on ideas, plans or projects. This type of conflict is not driven by emotions.
3. **Conflict of interest:** This occurs as a result of disagreement over allocation of resources and occurs as a result of different, most times incompatible proposition by various parties for the distribution of resources.
4. **Conflict of Values:** Personal beliefs of right and wrong are reflected in our values. Values have a major influence on an individual's attitude as well as behavior and are the underlying principles that affect our decisions. This type of conflict is also called as ideological conflict and occurs when two social entities disagree over values or ideologies. Values are so entrenched in our character that they are not easily identified or compromised. People might find it difficult to reach an agreement if they feel that their values are being compromised
5. **Goal conflict:** This is a form of conflict that occurs as a result of two or more conflicting goals. It occurs when the preferred result of both parties in a conflict are in disagreement with each other.
6. **Realistic vs. non-realistic conflict:** Also called as real vs. induced conflict, this type of conflict due to rational reasons that are mostly goal oriented versus conflicts without any rational content which have no bearing on goals and are used to release tension or show hostility or ignorance.
7. **Institutionalized and non-institutionalized conflict:** These kinds of conflict happens whether the players follow a set of rules or not. Behavior can be very predictable in institutionalized conflicts when conflict is non-institutionalized and the reverse is the case.
8. **Retributive Conflict:** This form of conflict occurs when one party starts a disagreement in order to punish the other party. In most cases this form of conflict would result in gains for the initiating party and a loss for the other party.
9. **Misattributed Conflict:** These are conflicts that arise as a result of incorrect assignment of causes for an action or issue to a social entity that is not responsible.
10. **Displaced Conflicts:** This form of conflicts arise when the parties involved in a conflict argue over irrelevant issues or when one party directs their negative emotions like frustration or anger to a social entity that has no involvement in the conflict.

Levels of Conflict

Conflicts that occur within an organization may be classified as interpersonal, intrapersonal, intergroup and intragroup. Intrapersonal conflicts occur when a member of an organization is assigned tasks or roles that do not match his interests, values, goals

or expertise [1]. Interpersonal conflicts on the other hand occur between two or more parties within an organization who may belong in the same level of hierarchy or different levels of hierarchy. Another common level of conflict is intragroup conflict which occurs as a result of disagreements with regards to tasks, goals or procedures among members of a group or between subgroups that exists within a group. Intergroup conflict occurs between different groups within an organization.

The different sources of conflict may be seen at either of the four levels, thus occurring within entities and between entities, driven by personal or social reasons. At social levels, the effects of cultural variables may influence the way a person approaches a social interaction as well as how he or she perceives a situation and chooses to resolve that situation [4].

Conflict Management and Resolution Strategy Styles

It is one of the critical factors for team effectiveness and success to choose the right type of conflict management and resolution strategy. There have been many researches and studies for theoretical models on conflict resolution styles in groups. It is generally accepted to choose different conflict management style depending on the conflict situation or team environment. Models of two styles to five styles have been evolved in the past decades. **Table 1** shows the comparison of conflict management styles.

Model	Styles				
	I	II	III	IV	V
Two Styles					
Deusch (1949)	Cooperative			Competitive	
Knudson, Sommers and Golding (1980)	Engagement		Avoidance		
Three Styles					
Putnam & Wilson (1982)	Solution orientation (Integrating)	Non-confrontation (obliging)		Control (dominating)	
Lawrence & Lorsch (1967)	Confrontation	Smoothing		Forcing	
Billingham & Sack (1987)	Reasoning			Verbal aggression, Violence	
Rands, Levinger & Mellinger (1981)			Avoid	Attack	Compromise
Four Styles					
Pruitt (1983)	Problem solving	Yielding	Inaction	Contending	
Kurdek (1994)	Problem solving	Compliance	Withdrawal	Conflict engagement	
Five Styles					
Follett (1940)	Integration	Suppression	Avoidance	Domination	Compromise
Blake & Mouton (1964)	Confrontation	Smoothing	Avoiding	Forcing	Compromise
Thomas (1976)	Collaborating	Accomending	Avoiding	Competing	Compromising
Rahim (1983)	Integrating	Obliging	Avoiding	Dominating	Compromising

Table 1 - Comparison of Conflict Management Styles [2]

Model of two styles was first suggested by Deutsch (1949) by using cooperative-competitive dichotomy. The view of the concept of pure competitive strategy is similar as that of the game theory term "zero-sum games" where the positive outcome of one party is equally matched by the negative outcome of the others. Deutsch team's research showed the research evidence to indicate that a cooperation style is more effective than the competitive style on functional outcome. Another model of two styles was introduced by Knudson, Sommers and Golding (1980) but was not greatly noticeable in the field of conflict resolution [2]. In later time, some more theoretical models of three-categories were developed and they have some similarities and differences. However, this three-categories model has not progressed much over the years due to the lack of evidence of the relationships between the styles and the organization outcome [2]. Mainly based on laboratory studies, Pruitt (1983) advised for a model of four styles to manage conflicts

effectively. But as for the relationship to productivity and performance improvement for organization, the evidence was not provided. The fifth model of five styles was first conceptualized by Mary P. Follett (1940) with three main ways to handle organizational conflicts with other two secondary ways. In 1964, Blake and Mouton first proposed a model of five conflict resolution types for organization which was later reinterpreted by Thomas (1976) as competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding and accommodating. Later Rahim (1983) and Rahim and Bonoma (1979) use a two-dimension model to differentiate these 5 styles of conflicts resolution. As shown in **Figure 1**, the first dimension is used to show the degree of how a person attempts to satisfy his or her own concern. The second dimension is used to show how a person wants to satisfy the concern of others. Five styles of conflict resolutions would be based on the result of these two dimensions.
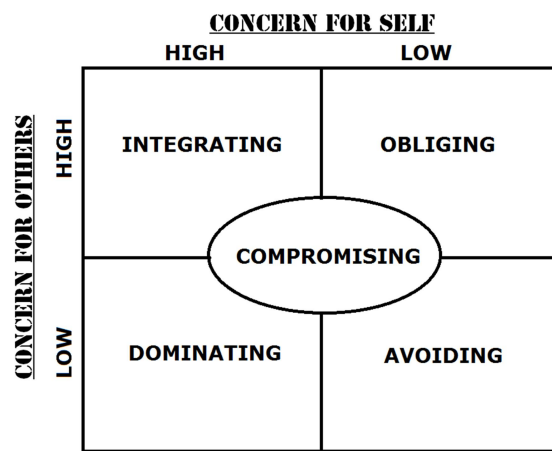

Figure 1 – Two-dimension Model of Conflict Management Styles [2]

I. Integrating style: This style involves collaboration among the parties to reach a win-win solution to resolve the conflicts through open discussion and honesty and commitment from all parties. Collaboration allows them to have better understanding of the difference among them and an improved working relationship [6].
II. Obliging style: This non-confrontation style focus on preserving the relationship with others, instead of seeking for the outcome which only meets one individual party's concern. A party which often uses this approach might fall victim to people who use the dominating style.
III. Dominating style: This most confrontational and competing style is more likely to result in a zero-sum outcome. In this situation, the similarities among the parties are emphasized while putting less focus on the differences [7]. This style can be appropriate in the situation where an immediate decision must be made under no consensus can be reached.
IV. Avoiding style: This non-confrontation style would mostly happen when the benefit in pursuing the conflict is small or less satisfactory [7]. It is often used by the people who have difficulties to face the conflicts or who are unwilling to accept blame or to place it on other parties. This approach could also be used to acquire cool off time before a conflict.
V. Compromising style: This modest style is to pursue an outcome which is mutually acceptable with the least impact or pain (such as resource or cost) for all the parties [7].

This style could be effective when all parties are equally powerful and willing to cooperate. Also, the result could build the better relationship for the future.

Multicultural Conflict Resolution Strategies and Related Research

Reducing conflict in teams is essential for increasing performance and many strategies to implement this have been shown. However, reducing conflict in a multicultural team is commonly seen as more complicated because it is difficult to create a list of potential behaviors of such a team. As an answer to this dilemma, we have decided to categorize cultures into one of the four following combinations of behaviors: Horizontal-Collectivist, Horizontal-Individualist, Vertical-Collectivist, and Vertical-Individualist. These definitions have been used in three of the quantitative papers and in the qualitative papers that we will cite.

In an individualist culture, people are independent and free within the group that they belong to, their personal goals are more important than the goals of the group, in this cultural context, the behavior of the people is a reflection of their attitudes and values and not that of the group. Collective cultures on the other hand reflects interdependence within groups and the behavior of members of a group in a collectivistic society is shaped by the norms and values of the group. While the main concern of an individualist is getting justice a collectivist's goal in conflict resolution is maintaining relationships [10]. There are different varieties of collectivist-individualist cultures and the above mentioned one used in several papers reviewed, it incorporates a horizontal- vertical component, accounting for team members to be individualistic within a group and be collectivistic while maintaining their identity as individuals, according to Trandis [10] the four culture types are defined as:
Horizontal Individualist (HI): These are people who want to be unique and do their own thing
Vertical Individualist (VI): This culture type is reflected by people who want to do their own thing and be the best
Vertical Collectivist (VC): This behavior is observed in cultures where of people willingly submit themselves to authority in the group and make sacrifices for the group
Horizontal Collectivist (HC): These cultural societies where people merge themselves with their in group

In an attempt to quantitatively find the conflict resolution preferences of individualists and collectivists (Deborah Cai) [7], it was found that individualist prefer avoiding, while collectivists prefer integrating and compromising. A more complicated qualitative study has also been done that attempted to find a trend indicating whether one's personality would override their cultural values when making decisions, however it was found that the cultural values tended to be making the decisions rather than the personality. It was also found that Vertical cultures prefer *avoiding* and that Vertical-Collective cultures prefer *dominating* and o*bliging*. This study also recorded the behaviors that the individuals exhibited when implementing their conflict resolution strategy such as physical force (*dominating*) and mutual discussion (*integrating*) [4].

In another qualitative study [8] that examined how these cultural values effect conflict management, it was found that that Vertical-Individualism tended to *avoid* while

horizontal-collectivism tended to *cooperate* while staying away from the avoiding and contending styles.

Finally, a qualitative case study [8] of a multinational bank was analyzed to construct a nine step conflict resolution method. We will later analyze this to see how it fits into the aforementioned cultural categories.

Results and Discussion

The following table presents a compilation of the three qualitative studies mentioned in the Multicultural Conflict Resolution Strategies section. We can see that the Horizontal-Collective culture tends to use the integrative strategy and that Vertical-Individual tends to use the Avoiding strategy. **Table 2** shows the count of statistically significant values found in all three qualitative multicultural surveys.

	Avoiding	Dominating	Compromising	Integrating	Obliging
Horizontal-Collective	1		1	2	
Horizontal-Individual	1				
Vertical-Individual	2				
Vertical-Collective	1	1	1	1	1

Table 2 – Count of Statistically Significant Values

Cross referencing the resolution strategies in **Table 2** with the table of their associated behaviors in **Table 4** [R4], allows us to hypothesize the types of behaviors that each cultural value type will exhibit. For example, a Horizontal-Collective culture may more likely use *Integrating* behavior, which may likely result in a resolution via 'Bargain/compromise' or 'Mutual discussion'. We can also deduce that undesired behaviors may be prevented by not choosing Vertical-Individual cultures for involvement in conflict resolution because according to this table, it is more likely that an *avoiding* solution will be used, likely resulting in 'Accept' or 'Give in' and thus not achieving the needs of all parties.

Item	Factor 1 Dominating	Factor 2 Avoiding	Factor 3 Integrating	Factor 4 Obliging	Factor 5 Contingency
Economic action	.776				
Physical force	.848				
Undermine esteem	.730				
Manipulate	.680				
Verbal force	.590				
Accept		.714			
Step down		.575			
Avoid		.645			
Give in		.698			
Bargain/compromise			.639		
Mutual discussion			.715		
Separation			−.756		
Confrontational discussion				.497	
Third party				.805	
Wait and see				.616	
Withhold					.468
Prior history					.721

Table 3 – Five-factor solution for the 17 items in the Sternberg and Dobson Scale [4]

Expanding on the topic of *integrative* behavior, when performance has been an issue, *integrative* behavior has been observed as being the best way to improve performance, for example, in a case study of 60 international managers"…team members appeared to look for similarities quickly and things in common, not differences" [9] and they also mentioned that, "Developing a working culture...demands active listening, giving space, integrating contributions and giving attention to issues of trust, disclosure, language and sharing" [9]. In addition to this they mentioned "empathy" and "…willingness to acquire new patterns of behavior", which implies that they became a horizontal-collectivist culture. This is most prominently illustrated in the qualitative case study of a multinational Swedish bank [8] where a Vertical-Collective decision was made that caused conflict within the organization and an attempt was made to resolve it using verbal force. However, this dominating behavior was not an acceptable outcome for company performance and so a higher level executive chose an *integrative* resolution strategy that was primarily focused on creative a Horizontal- Collective culture. Examples of this includes the Managing Director, meeting one on with employees, offering his help as a facilitator, and setting up a system for continuous feedback of employee input for future issues in need of conflict resolution. In fact, we can see that this conflict was used as a tool to improve performance by exploring the conflict to discover different points of view and facilitate improved plans of action.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have listed the different forms of conflict and strategies to resolve it, as well as list the conflict resolution strategies likely to be used by cultures that fit well into the cultural values model of Horizontal-collectivism, etc. More interestingly, this invites further research into how conflict can be predicted and resolved in multicultural environments by using this cultural values model, rather than having to spend additional time study the idiosyncrasies of a new culture. We also encourage that further research be done to discover whether horizontal-collective cultures are the best for resolving multicultural conflict, as we have seen in the cited literature that organizations have home-grown this type of culture within their own organization to achieve higher performance.

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