CONFLICT MANAGEMENT : A STUDY OF SOME OF ITS DETERMINANTS

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ABSTRACT

There are various approaches to conflict management and we generally rely on one style – our dominant style. The effectiveness of the style would depend on the type of the situation and the people one is dealing with (Level and Galle, 1988). Pareek ('97) has outlined eight approaches to conflict management namely resignation, withdrawal, diffusion, appeasement, confrontation, compromise, arbitration and negotiation. The first four are avoidance modes and the last four are approach modes. Understanding variables which influence the process of conflict management will help achieve such flexibility. The aim of the present study was to indentify the effect of type of situation (educational and management institutes), gender (male and female) and thinking styles (legislative, executive and judicial) on the style of conflict management. A step wise multiple regression analysis showed legislative style of thinking to be a significant predictor of the use of diffusion style to manage conflict. The appeasement and arbitration styles were predicted to be used by people with an executive and judicial style of thinking. An overall paired sample t-test revealed that people are more likely to use approach rather than avoidance modes of conflict management. Various shortcomings of the present study and directions for future research are discussed.

An organization ideally is a place where highly motivated people try to achieve predetermined objectives. According to Katz and Kahn Conflict is a collision of actions. Conflicts occur when two or more group perceives that they have incompatibility of goals and interdependence of activity. The traditional managerial approach to conflict has been one of suppression and elimination. Conflict has

generally been viewed negatively. MacCrimmin & Taylor (2002) define conflict as existing in situations where multiple participants have different outcome preferences and act in such a way so as to affect the outcome of others. The human relations view treats conflict as a natural occurrence which may even enhance group performance. The interactionist approach holds that an ongoing minimum level of conflict is necessary to keep the group viable, self – critical and creative (DeDreu, 2006).

Functional conflicts are issue oriented and dysfunctional conflicts are relationship oriented. Conflicts can lead to innovation and change, effective problem solving, prevent stagnation and lead to challenging of existing norms and practices. Thus functional conflicts are a source of increased organizational effectiveness. Dysfunctional or relationship conflicts focus on interpersonal relationships and are emotional or personality oriented (Rao, 2009).

Parekh (1988) combined the avoidance – approach dimension to generate eight styles or modes of conflict management. Avoidance Modes of Conflict Management: resignation, withdrawal, diffusion, appeasement. Approach Mode or Styles: confrontation, compromise, arbitration, negotiation.

Various studies have dealt with the efficacy of the various modes of conflict resolution. Philips and Cheston (1979) found that managers generally used one method and when it failed, would fall back on other. Interestingly forcing was the most commonly used "feed back" method. Using a factorial approach Rahim and Magner (1994, 1995) found 5 dimensions of inter personal conflicts perceived by the managers namely avoiding, obliging with superiors, subordinates and peers. Managers were mainly obliging with superiors, subordinates and peers. Managers were mainly obliging with superiors while using the integrating style with subordinates. With peers the dominant style was compromising. To a lesser extent managers were compromising and dominating with superiors and avoiding with subordinates.

Kozan (1989) in his study of cross cultural difference s reported Turkish, Jordanian, and US managers to be alike in their preference for a collaborate style. The Arab Middle eastern executives used more of an integrating and avoiding style in handling inter personal conflicts, while US executives used more of an obliging

dominating and compromising style. Sayeed (2002), used Pareek's measure of conflict management styles, With Indian Managers and found negotiation to be the most favored style followed by compromise, arbitration and appeasement, Resignation, diffusion, withdrawal and confrontation were seen as the least preferred styles.

Thinking Styles

According to Sternberg (1997) people not only think in different ways but also under estimate the extent to which others think the way they do. A style is a preferred way of thinking. It is not ability but rather how we use the abilities. People whose styles match those expected in certain situations are judged as having higher levels of ability despite the fact that what is present is not ability but a fit between a person's style and the tasks they are performing.

Legislative people like to create their own rules and prefer problems that are not prestructured. Such a style is conducive to creativity but unfortunately it is not rewarded by the school environment. Executive people like to follow rules and prefer problems that are prestrucutred solving given mathematical problems, applying rules to problems, giving talks or lessons based on other people's ideas and enforcing rules. A gifted child with an executive style is likely to do well in school while a gifted child with a legislative style is likely to do well in school while a gifted child with a legislative style is likely to be viewed as non – conforming and even rebellious. Judicial people evaluate rules and procedures and prefer activities like writing critiques, judging people and their work and evaluating programs.

Styles develop due to socialization and therefore amenable to change Styles are measurable and teachable and those valued at one time may not be valued at another. Similarly different styles are generally valued differently in different places. Styles on an average are neither good nor bad; it's a question of fit between one's style and work.

A Stylistic fit is generally confused with levels of abilities we can better utilize other people's talents, and better help them develop it we recognize people for their own stylistic strengths, rather than for what we might ideally like them to be.

Method
DESIGN

A three factor experimental design with repeated measures on the last factor was used. Two levels each of sex, type of situation along with three levels of thinking style gave rise to a 2 (sex: male or female) X 2 (type of situation: managerial or educational) X 3 (thinking styles: legislative, executive or judicial) factorial design with 12 cells, Sex and type of situation were between subject factors whereas thinking styles was a within subject factor.

SUBJECTS

Subjects were working managers and senior college lecturers, both males and females, from the city of Mumbai. The group of managers consisted of 30 males and 30 females working in various firms in the city. 30 female and 30 male lecturers

PROCEDURE

Subjects were contacted individually and the Opinion Survey of Conflict Management and Thinking Styles Self - Assessment Scales were administrated, the order being reversed for half the subjects. After checking that each item had been answered, the sheets were collected and subjects were thanked for their cooperation.

RESULTS

Table 1: R square and F Values for the Predictor of Legislative Style of Thinking and the Criteria of Diffusion and Avoidance Style of Conflict Management.

Predictor	Criterion	Adjusted R square	F	df^1	df^2	Significance
Legislative	Diffusion	0.031	4.813	1	118	.03
Legislative	Avoidance	0.036	5.424	1	118	.022

Table 2: R square and F Values for the Predictor of Executive Style of Thinking and the Criteria of Appeasement and Arbitration Style of Conflict Management.

Predictor	Criterion	Adjusted R square	F	df^1	df^2	Significance
Executive	Appeasement	0.033	5.124	1	118	.025
Executive	Arbitration	0.029	4.508	1	118	.036

Table 3: R square and F Values for the Predictor of Judicial Style of Thinking and the Criteria of Appeasement and Arbitration Style of Conflict Management.

Predictor	**Criterion**	**Adjusted R square**	**F**	**df^1**	**df^2**	**Significance**
Judicial	Appeasement	0.054	7.777	1	118	.006
Judicial	Arbitration	0.029	4.515	1	118	.036

Table 4: The means of the dependent measure of the 8 style of Conflict Management.

Resignation	Withdrawal	Diffusion	Appeasement	Confrontation	Compromise	Arbitration	Negotiation
6.89	8.02	13.03	7.99	9.48	9.53	10.19	8.23

Discussion

The three – way ANOVA was not significant in effects nor were the interactions significant. Thus the effect of sex, type of situation and thinking styles was not significant. This means that there is no difference in the use of conflict management styles of men and women. Also since the effect of type of situation was not significant, it appears that educators and managers, irrespective of sex, do not differ significantly from each other in the styles of conflict management.

Similarly Thinking Styles Self – Assessment scale of Sternberg (1977) has no effect on the modes of conflict management used by male and female educationists and male and female managers. Thus the hypotheses regarding the effect of sex, type of situation and thinking styles on conflict management styles was not substantiated. It appears from the present study that there are no significant differences in the conflict management styles of men and women. Also whether once is looking at managers from the educational field or an industrial setting, there is no difference in their modes of conflict management. The step wise multiple regression analysis yielded some significant results. The legislative style of thinking is a significant predictor of the use of diffusion, as well as of the use of avoidance modes of conflict management. It appears thus that people with a legislative style tend to use diffusion

as a mode of resolving conflicts and rely on avoidance modes rather than the approach modes of conflict management.

The R^2 = .31 i.e 31% of the variance in the criterion variables of diffusion and avoidance modes is explained by the variance in the predictor of the legislative style of thinking.

The executive style of thinking emerged as a significant predictor of both appeasement and arbitration styles of conflict management. Thus people with the executive style of thinking were more likely to use appeasement and arbitration as modes of conflict management, the adjusted R^2 for the two being .033 and .029. Thus 3.3% of the variance in appeasement and 2.9% of the variance in arbitration scores is accounted for by the variance in the criterion of the executive style of thinking. This result is confusing since appeasement is an avoidance mode and arbitration is an approach mode to conflict management. Thus executives use two different but apparently contradictory modes.

In case of the judicial style of thinking, stepwise multiple regression analysis again yielded significant R^2 and beta coefficients for the appeasement and arbitration styles of conflict management, the adjusted R^2 being .054 for appeasement and .029 for arbitration. Thus 5.4% of the variance and 2.9% of the variance in appeasement and arbitration measures respectively are explained by the variance in the judicial style of thinking. The judicial style too predicts two contradictory modes of conflict management namely appeasement (avoidance mode) and arbitration (approach mode) though it is a better predictor of appeasement rather than arbitration. This result supports the hypothesis that judicial people are more likely to use the arbitration mode of conflict management.

An overall paired samples t- test for the approach and avoidance modes of conflict management yield a $t (119) = 2.953$, $P<.004$. Thus overall people are more likely to use approach modes rather than avoidance modes to managing conflicts. A comparison of the means of all the eight modes of conflict management yielded the highest mean for the diffusion mode (13.02) which is an avoidance mode of conflict management. This means that though people (male and female lecturers and managers) in the study use approach modes to conflict management, there is a greater use of one avoidance mode to conflict management namely diffusion.

Conclusion

The variable of sex was not significant in the present study. This means that variations in the socialization process for men and women do not contribute significantly to conflict management. Also the factor of type of situation was not significant. Thus whether one is dealing with providers of services or people in the industrial / manufacturing sectors, both managers use more or less similar modes of conflict management. Managers in an industrial setting were expected to use a power oriented method like arbitration while lecturers would tend to use a problem oriented method like negotiation. Form the analysis of the data it was found that both lecturers and managers rely more on approach modes to conflict management, overall, though their use of diffusion, an avoidance mode of conflict management was the highest compared to other modes. Thus Indian managers buy time to defuse strong emotional reactions to a conflicting situation.

Sayeed (2002) found negotiation to be the most preferred style among managers of a training group while the present study with managers found diffusion to be the most preferred style. Sayeed's (2002) study included management trainees which perhaps operated as a variable influencing subject's response.

Another surprising result of the present study was the non significant effect of thinking styles on conflict management styles. Thus it seems that the way a person manages conflict has no relation to his preferred style of thinking and preferred way of doing things.

The stepwise multiple regression analysis however revealed that people with a legislative style of thinking tend to use diffusion in particular and avoidance modes in general as their preferred modes in handling conflict.

Legislative people are more creative and prefer to have their own ways of doing things. People with the executive style of thinking prefer rules, procedures and structured situations. Thus it is not surprising that they tend to use appeasement and arbitration. They tend to use appeasement i.e. buy temporary peace by agreeing to some of the demands of the conflicting other. This is an avoidance mode of conflict management. As hypnotized, it was found that the executives tend to use arbitration that is third party intervention. Both these modes result in strengthening the demands

and belligerence of the other group, though arbitration unlike appeasement is an approach mode of conflict management. In both the methods, the conflict tends to remain unresolved. Thus following structure may be more important than managing conflict for persons with an executive style of thinking.

People with a judicial style of thinking prefer to analyze and evaluate situations, judge people and evaluate programs. As hypothesized the judicial do not rely on conformation to manage conflicts. Rather they tend to use arbitration specially and avoidance modes in general in their management of conflict situations.

Thus it seems that conflict management is a complex process and cannot be analyzed in terms of the effect of subject characteristics like sex and thinking styles and situational variables like an educational or an industrial milieu. Conflict management can be viewed as a process and the mode of conflict management would change depending on the perceptions of the in – group, the out – group, the situation (i.e. personal, social, work related or of local, national, international significance) and the goals of the conflict resolution process.

The study of conflict management assumes significance in the present scenario. Globalizations, individualism, assertiveness, self survival in the face of cut throat competition create many conflicting situations at various levels of interaction. Managing conflicts to create a win / win situation for the parties involved will perhaps be a much needed skill that all managers may need to face the challenge of tomorrow.

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