Employees’ conflict management strategies and demography: A case of Pakistan

Amjad Ali Chaudhry1*, Muhammad Sajjad2 and Irfan Khan1

1Department of Business Administration, Iqra National University, Peshawar, Pakistan.
2Department of Management Sciences, COMSATS Institute of Information Technology, Attock Campus, Pakistan

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This paper investigates the difference in the selection of employees’ conflict management strategies at their workplace across different age groups and departments. For this purpose, a questionnaire was got filled from 100 employees of Pakistan Telecommunication Company Limited working at managerial level by applying convenient sampling technique. Conflict management strategies were measured through a tool comprising of 20 items asked on five point Likert type scale. Chi-square test revealed that there is a significant difference in conflict management strategies adopted by employees. No overall difference of conflict management strategies was found between upper versus lower age group and support versus technical staff. However, younger employees choose compromising approach significantly higher than older employees. The findings can be utilized by managers to shape the policies and culture of the organization in order to better fit it with the ever changing environment.

Key words: Organizational behavior, conflict management strategies, age groups, functional departments.

INTRODUCTION

Whenever human beings interact, conflict is bound to occur because individual values, goals and aspirations differ, both among individuals and over time (Darling and Fogliasso, 1999). Conflict encompasses our organizational life (Whetton and Cameron, 2008 p. 364) and remains an inevitable and commonplace phenomenon of social life as well. Conflict is a serious problem in organizations and can charge its toll in either way—positive or negative (Adomi and Anie, 2006). Conflict can be a positive force for change within organizations (Darling and Fogliasso, 1999) however the reality in most cases is that the impact of conflict is negative at least for the lower level of management working at shop floor (Edwards and Walton, 2000). It can create such conditions that make it near to impossible for employees to work with each other (Robbins, 2005). The positive or negative effect of the conflict on outcomes may be the consequence of the nature of the conflicts and the way these conflicts are handled (Liu, Fu, and Liu, 2009). In order to enhance organizational learning and effectiveness, affective/relationship conflict should be minimized while moderate amount of substantive/task conflict should be maintained by altering the sources of conflict (Rahim, 2002).

In organizations employees face conflicts while working in groups, teams, and departments (Adomi and Anie, 2006; Liu, Fu, and Liu, 2009). Employees’ intra-group conflicts affect their job performance negatively (Rahim and Psenicka, 2004). Within teams or groups, relationship conflicts reduce team cohesiveness while both relationship and task conflicts were found to be negatively associated with firm performance (Liu et al., 2009). However, moderate amounts of team and task conflict yield higher level of satisfaction among team members of a project (Leung, Liu, and Ng, 2005). Interpersonal conflict involves negative emotions and it was found that interpersonal conflict affect project outcomes consistently and negatively even when managed well (Barki and Hartwick, 2001).

The theories of individual and group conflict management can be generalized to predict conflict management at the national and international level. The way in which countries manage a dispute is not a random process. To a significant degree, there are typical forms of conflict management used by different nations that depend...
upon its position in the world system (Borg, 1992). Conflict among nations can be disastrous. Endeavors and time is required to ensure peace that is still uncertain, and the success relies on the degree of effort and the size of the investments in conflict management endeavors (Genicot and Skaperdas, 2002). So, it can be said that conflicts are affecting directly and negatively our personal life, social life, organizations, and the world. These problems can be minimized by managing conflicts effectively.

A big chunk of foreign direct investment has been received by telecom sector in Pakistan. Thus, acquiring a perspective about conflict management strategies preferred by Pakistani managers is a precondition for global organizations and markets that wish to acquire or collaborate with Pakistani organizations (Ozkalp, Sungur and Ozdemir, 2009). This study intends to examine the conflict management strategies being used by the employees of Pakistan Telecommunication Company Limited (PTCL) at Peshawar office. Objectives of the study are outlined as follows:

1. To find out the conflict management strategies preferred by employees working at PTCL.
2. To find out the difference of conflict management strategies between older and younger employees.
3. To find out the difference of conflict management strategies between employees working in support and technical departments.

**Literature review**

Conflict can surface between individuals, groups, nations, regions, or even religions. It can arise anytime and anywhere in our personal, academic and professional life. In order to solve/minimize conflict in organizations, enable employees to learn the various styles of handling interpersonal conflict to deal with different conflict situations effectively (Fleetwood, 1987; Rahim, 2002). Addressing this issue Salami (2009) recommended that counselors and psychologists should develop programs to foster conflict resolution for both subordinates and superiors in order to improve performance in organizations.

Darling and Fogliasso (1999) presented a model of conflict management that encompasses three basic steps- preliminary, resolution, and maintenance. Preliminary steps begin with powerbase development, relational acceptance and meaningful communication. Resolution steps include assumption analysis, objective identification and alternative selection. Maintenance steps deal with action agreement, feedback review and continuing oversight. Effective use of this model allows managers to deal with conflict in organizations in a constructive and creative way.

To manage conflicts properly, behavior style model can also be the answer (Darling and Walker, 2001). According to this model, the most productive interpersonal relationships and communications occur when two styles become complementary - each individual’s strengths compensating for the weaknesses of the other. Hence, in addition to understand one’s own behavior and the behavior of others in the organization one must try to adapt the skills of ‘Style Flex’ that enable people to function in comfort zone fitting with the situation.

According to Rahim (2002) management of organizational conflict involves diagnosis and intervention. Proper diagnosis should measure the amount of conflict, styles of handling interpersonal conflicts, sources of conflicts, organizational learning and effectiveness. Intervention is needed if there is too much affective conflict, or too much substantive conflict for routine tasks, or too much or too little substantive conflict for non routine tasks.

Researchers had viewed conflict on different dimensions for instance personal, interpersonal, intra-group, and inter group conflict (Adomi and Anie, 2006; Elman and Gilbert, 1984); and task and relationship conflict (Liu et al., 2009). As this study intends to examine the conflict management strategies adopted by employees, so it considers it as an interpersonal conflict in organizational setting. Barki and Hartwick (2001) defined interpersonal conflict as a ‘phenomenon that occurs between interdependent parties as they experience negative emotional reactions to perceived disagreements and interference with the attainment of their goals’.

De Dreu, Evers, Beersma, Kluwer and Nauta’s (2001) study has substantiated the ‘Dual Concern Theory’. This is a two dimensional theory based on concern for self (assertiveness) and concern for others (cooperativeness). This theory produces four styles of conflict management. On a 2×2 matrix forcing, avoiding, problem solving, and yielding take the corner positions while compromising identified as a separate strategy of conflict management take the middle position.

According to research, (Dee, Henkin, and Holman, 2004; Henkin, Cistone, and Dee, 2000) the most frequently used strategy was collaboration/integration. As it concerns both self and other participants of a project, so presidents/principals generally prefer solution oriented conflict management approaches where disagreements and role conflicts are settled down through collaborative and integrative problem solving. Leung et al. (2005) found that integration style was positively correlated with the level of satisfaction of team members. Paul, Samarah, Seetharaman, and Mykytyn (2004) revealed that collaboration is the key to improve the performance of culturally diverse virtual teams using group support systems. Additionally, collaboration among team members was central to enhance the degree of agreement, perceived decision quality, and satisfaction with the decision process. Collaboration approach was also found...
to positively boost team cohesiveness and team effectiveness when used to deal with task conflicts (Liu et al., 2009).

Obliging/accommodating approach for conflict management satisfies the other party’s concerns while neglecting one’s own (Whetton and Cameron, 2008 p. 372). Ozkalp et al. (2009) revealed that the use of obliging style of conflict management changes according to the status of managers. Obliging strategy is used frequently when the conflict partner has an upper level status. The study (conducted in Turkey) further revealed that employees are forced to accept the views/interests of their superiors because of formal and fear based relationship with bosses. In this regard, obliging style of conflict management may enhance harmony and social desirability, but reduce the potential of creativity and innovation. This asserts that flexibility, adaptability and a willingness to compromise and solve problems are necessary for successful conflict management in a collectivistic society. The avoiding approach neglects the concerns of both parties by evading the conflict or postponing a solution (Whetton and Cameron, 2000). The avoiding style of conflict management was found to make worse the negative effects of both task and relationship conflicts (Liu et al., 2009) because the people involved are not actively seeking to deal with the conflicts and avoidance will naturally make matters worse.

Compromising approach makes an attempt to obtain partial satisfaction for both parties, in a way that both are asked to sacrifice for a common gain (Whetton and Cameron, 2000). Experienced presidents and presidents of large institutions reflected the limited use of compromise (split the difference) approach to manage conflicts (Dee et al., 2004). Compromising was found to positively relate to team cohesiveness and firm performance when used to deal with relationship conflicts (Liu et al., 2009).

Forcing style of conflict management tries to satisfy one’s own needs at the expense of the needs of the other party. Usually, this is achieved by the means of formal authority physical threats, or by ignoring the claims/concerns of the other party (Whetton and Cameron, 2008).

For conflicts to be managed functionally, one style may be more appropriate than another depending upon the situation (Rahim, 2002). An individual’s conflict management style in a certain conflict situation may depend upon education, experience, personality, conflict setting, and other person’s gender (Fleetwood, 1987). Various studies substantiate that culture has an effect on conflict management strategy adopted by employees for instance it can be significantly predicted that collectivism would be positively associated with avoiding, compromising and accommodating styles of conflict management (Su’udy, 2009). Paul et al. (2004) also demonstrated that individualistic-collectivistic orientation of the team members influence the level of collaborative style pursued. The higher is the individualistic orientation of a virtual team the lower is its collaborative conflict management style. Adomi and Anie (2006) found that the most common style of managing conflict among Nigerian university library employees was accommodation followed by avoidance. A study (Ozkalp et al., 2009) found that integrating first, and compromising second, are the most preferred conflict management styles of Turkish managers – a collectivistic society. Research (Su’udy, 2009) indicated that Indonesians - collectivistic people - preferred avoiding and neglect styles significantly more than Americans. The neglect style assumes low concern for others that is usually reported to be associated with individualism. Americans - individualistic people - preferred the integrating, accommodating/obliging and dominating styles significantly more than Indonesians did.

Hypotheses

H$_1$: Conflict management strategies preferred by the employees of PTCL are different.

H$_2$: Conflict management strategies opted by lower and upper age group are different.

H$_3$: Conflict management strategies opted by the employees working in support departments and technical departments are different.

METHODOLOGY

Population and sampling

In order to maximize comparability and minimize contamination caused by different management systems and ownership types, a single firm (PTCL) was selected to study the said problem. Moreover, to neutralize the effect of cultural variations a single office (Peshawar) was opted to study. So, the population of the study comprised of all the employees of PTCL working at some managerial level in Peshawar office. Owing to employees’ busy schedule and non cooperative behavior for academic research projects, questionnaires were got filled by following convenience sampling technique. All the departments of PTCL were divided into two sections: support staff comprised of the departments of marketing, sales and distribution, finance, revenue, and HR while technical staff included the departments of engineering, computer and networking. In this regard quota sampling technique was done by selecting 50 employees from each section.

Procedure

To collect data, researchers approached the director of the above mentioned office, and discussed the objectives of the research. The employees were contacted personally and after explaining the questions they were requested to fill in the questionnaires. Employees were also allowed to fill the questionnaire at their own
Measurement tool

The measurement tool “Strategies for Resolving Conflict” developed by Schermerhorn, Hunt, and Osborn (2002) was used in this study. The strategies include accommodating, collaborating, avoiding, forcing and compromising styles to handle conflicts. The tool was consisted of twenty elements, four questions for each strategy. In order to make the questions easy to understand for the respondents, some questions were rephrased or some words were replaced with easy words.

Data analysis

Firstly, editing of the questionnaires and coding of the variables used was done. Missing values for items against conflict management strategies were replaced with the mean value for that item. The strategy receiving the highest scores was considered as the primary conflict management strategy for the respondent. For employees securing highest scores for more than one strategy, primary conflict management style was assigned objectively by giving equal representation to all styles. Chi-square test was applied to determine difference in the selection of conflict management strategies by the employees.

RESULTS

Out of the 100 respondents contacted 96 were males and 4 were females, their average age was 40 years and mean experience was nearly 13 years.

Hypothesis 1

To check the first hypothesis that conflict management strategies preferred by the employees of PTCL are different Chi square test was applied as shown in Tables 1 and 2.

Chi-square significant value of 0.006 (less than 0.05) supports the first hypothesis. This asserts that there is a difference in conflict management strategies preferred by the employees of PTCL. From the frequency table, it is observed that the most used conflict management strategy is avoiding and the least used strategy is forcing.

Hypothesis 2

To check the second hypothesis that conflict management strategies opted by lower age group and higher age group are different, Chi-square test was applied (Tables 3 and 4).

The chi-square significant value of 0.242 (higher than 0.05) does not support our second hypothesis that conflict management strategies opted by lower age group and higher age group are different. However, Table 3 reveals a stark difference across lower and upper age groups for compromising approach to manage conflicts. To check any difference for this strategy between the two age groups, Chi square test was applied as shown in Tables 5 and 6.

According to Table 6, test statistic significant value is less than 0.05, which asserts that lower and upper age groups are different when they approach compromising strategy to handle their conflicts. Table 5 shows that employees below the age of 40 are more inclined towards compromising style as compared to employees in upper age category.

Hypothesis 3

To check the third hypothesis that conflict management strategies opted by the employees working in support departments and technical departments are different,
Chi-square test was applied (Tables 7 and 8). Chi-square significant value of 0.946 (higher than 0.05) does not support the third hypothesis. The results of this study revealed that the conflict management strategies selected by support and technical staff are not significantly different.

**DISCUSSION**

The study found out that, conflict management strategies are significantly different for the employees of PTCL. The most likely opted conflict management strategy is avoiding, then accommodating and integrating then compromising and the least likely is forcing. As Pakistan shares collectivistic culture with other Asian countries, this finding is supported by a previous study which predicted that collectivism would be positively associated with avoiding, compromising, accommodating and integrating conflict management strategies (Su’udy, 2009). A study conducted in Nigeria reported that the most prevalent conflict management approach was compromising followed by avoiding (Adomi and Anie, 2006). In collectivistic culture people always try to develop relations and avoid conflicts which may render them to go for such strategies. This study (carried out in PTCL) revealed that the most preferred conflict

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**Table 3.** Cross tabulation of age categories with primary conflict management strategy.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age categories</th>
<th>Forcing</th>
<th>Accommodating</th>
<th>Compromising</th>
<th>Avoiding</th>
<th>Integrating</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Below 40</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40 and Above</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 4.** Chi-square test for conflict management strategies by different age categories.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Value</th>
<th>Df</th>
<th>Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pearson Chi-square</td>
<td>5.477</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.242</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 5.** Frequency of compromising approach for lower and upper age groups.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age categories</th>
<th>Observed N</th>
<th>Expected N</th>
<th>Residual</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Below 40</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40 and Above</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>-4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>14</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 6.** Chi-square test for compromising approach adopted by lower and upper age groups.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Value</th>
<th>Df</th>
<th>Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pearson Chi-Square</td>
<td>4.57</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.033</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 7.** Department wise primary conflict management strategies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Department</th>
<th>Forcing</th>
<th>Accommodating</th>
<th>Compromising</th>
<th>Avoiding</th>
<th>Integrating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Support</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
management approach was avoiding that neglects concerns of the both parties involved. The pervasive use of this strategy will make things worse (Liu, Fu and Liu, 2009) which is evident from the profitability of the firm.

The results asserted no difference for the selection of different conflict management approaches between lower and upper age group. However, younger employees showed high frequency to adopt compromising approach than older employees. Partial use of compromising (split the difference approach) by the senior employees may indicate their dissatisfaction/disliking of this approach. Research conducted by Dee et al. (2004) also achieved same results where presidents having less experience in the same position were found more likely to use a compromising approach than respondents with high presidential experience.

The study also found that there is no difference in conflict management strategies opted by the employees working in support and technical departments. The probable reasons for this finding may include the collectivistic culture of Pakistan; and same environment, uniform policies, rules and regulations in the said organization.

Conclusion

The study concluded that people adopt different conflict management strategies at the workplace. The research revealed that the preferred strategy for managing conflicts by PTCL employees is avoiding and the least used strategy is forcing. On the basis of age groups, the study could find no overall difference for conflict management strategies between younger and older employees. However, significant difference was found for compromising approach where employees below 40 years of age show high inclination for this strategy than older employees. Research also revealed no difference for conflict management strategies between employees working in technical and support departments.

Suggestions for further research

Future studies may be conducted on a broader level by studying the entire organization, industry/sector. Studies may be done by incorporating many other demographic, psychological, social or cultural variables. Further research may be executed by using ability based tools to measure conflict management strategies.

Limitations

The main limitation of the study was the use of self-report measure to collect the data. Another limitation may be that data was collected conveniently from a small heterogeneous group consisting of employees from different levels-lower, middle and higher. Future studies may be designed to collect data randomly from a larger and a homogenous group to produce more valid and generalizable results. Owing to a very small number of females employed by PTCL, the sample size was overwhelmingly comprised of male respondents.

REFERENCES


