

# APPLICATION OF CONFLICT MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES AS PERCEIVED BY THE MANAGER FOR HIMSELF AND FOR HIS SUPERIOR: A COMPARISON

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It was hypothesized that the manager prefers to opt the same strategy in resolving the conflict as that of his immediate superior in the context of job related matters. Another factor which was investigated was to determine whether the manager or his immediate superior has adopted any variation in conflict management strategies. For this purpose, 86 executives were taken as respondents to test the hypothesis. The study revealed that there was "a moderate degree of dissimilarity between the manager's own practices and his perception about his immediate superior regarding application of conflict management strategies. It was also found that there was a variation in applying the strategies to resolve the conflict in case of both the manager and his immediate superior.

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Conflicts in the past were considered bad and dangerous to the organizational working and, therefore, they were not entertained, rather suppressed, by the managers. Even Mayo (1945), the pioneer of the human relations movement, considered it as a social disease and advocated that it should be avoided. Many others theorized that conflicts are dysfunctional and disrupts the smooth functioning of the organization. By and large, bureaucrats regarded conflicts as dysfunctional.

As observed today, conflicts are an integral part of the organization and, therefore, cannot be either suppressed or avoided, rather, can be made functional, if managed properly. When the conflicts are made goal-directed, they help generate ideas of superior quality based on different frames of reference, considerations and insights of both the parties to the conflict. New ideas can increasingly be utilised for identifying and removing the bottlenecks in the organization and in assessing and developing human potential.

Conflicts have been studied in many diverse organizational contexts such as line and staff controversies (Dalton, 1950; Lawrence and Lorsch, 1967); interpersonal role perceptions (Kahn *et al.*, 1964, Rizzo *et al.*, 1970), personal dislikes (Ravan and Kru-

glanski, 1970); differences in knowledge, beliefs or basic values (Blake *et al.*, 1964a; Deutsch, 1969; Seiler, 1963). These studies, though highly illuminating in certain respects, do not throw much light on the use of conflict management methods in interpersonal situations.

Two studies, one of Burke (1969) and the other of Renwick (1975a; 1975b) attempted to analyze conflict management methods in superior and subordinate context. Burke (1969) found that the superiors not only perceived confrontation to be the most effective strategy, but also described it as the most frequently used method for dealing with a superior and subordinate conflict. In his study, the managers were asked to think of a time when they felt especially good (or bad) about the way an interpersonal conflict, in which they were also involved, was resolved. The descriptions of the conflicts as provided by them were then separated in terms of effective resolution (felt especially good) and ineffective resolution (felt especially bad) with reference to Blake *et al.*'s, (1964b) five methods of managing a conflict. Renwick (1975) found that superiors used confrontation as the most likely method to be used, followed in descending order, by compromise and smoothing while compromise, confrontation, and forcing, in

that order, were the methods most likely to be used, by subordinates. It was also noted that perceptions of the other party's behaviour were more similar to the respondents' self perception than to the other member of the dyad's description of his own style of conflict management. Thomas (1978) also supported this view and noted that self-fulfilling prophecies frequently occurred in managing a conflicting situation.

In this paper, it is proposed to make a slight departure from Burke (1969) and Renwick's (1975a; 1975b) approaches in studying congruence between how a manager himself resolves a conflict and how his immediate superior resolves a conflict as perceived by the same manager. In other words, does a manager adopt the same style of conflict management as that of his immediate superior or differently. Besides this, we propose to study the variation in the application of conflict management strategies adopted by the manager himself and by his superior.

#### METHOD

##### *Sample*

The data were collected from 86 middle level executives who were undergoing short term training programmes on executive development. These respondents came from public and private sector organizations and represented a wide range of industries viz. engineering, chemicals, pharmaceuticals, textile, agro-based industries, trading and financial corporations. Out of 86 managers, 59 (i.e. 69%) respondents belonged to public sector organizations, 27 (i.e. 31%) belonged to private sector enterprises. The overall response rate was estimated at 93 per cent. The age of the respondents ranged from 25 to 45 years with a mean of 35 years. The minimum educational level of the

respondents was graduation in Arts or Engineering subjects. They had put in 5 to 15 years of service in their respective organizations.

##### *Measures*

A battery of questionnaires consisting of conflict management scale, least preferred co-worker scale (LPC), and a managerial leadership scale was used. In the present paper, conflict management data have been reported with a view to keep the study focussed on the two objectives already described.

##### *Conflict Management Scales (Manager — Self)*

This scale is composed of 8 methods which were thoroughly checked for their face validity and relevance to organizational settings. The dimensions and their descriptions are as follows:

*Avoiding Arguments:* Avoid argument, take no responsibility and try not to get involved.

*Following rules:* Follow the rules and regulations strictly to gain more time in order to be fair.

*Accommodating Others:* Allow other's points of view to prevail by sacrificing his own, to accommodate others.

*Consulting Others:* Discuss only to take other's points of view on conflicting issue to give his decision finally.

*Toning down differences:* Tone down the differences, emphasize common interests, to maintain good relations.

*Forcing:* Use power, position or knowledge, to force acceptance of his own point of view.

*Compromising:* Search for an intermediate solution where both the parties give or take equally to strike a compromise.

*Confrontation:* Bring the problem into the open, analyse the issues, share information, and cooperate with each other with a commitment to resolve the conflict even if the feelings are hurt in the process.

These methods were presented along with a 5 point scale, ranging from "Never applied-1" to "Always applied-5" and respondents were asked to indicate as to which conflict management method he would generally use to resolve the differences and disagreements between him and his subordinates on job related matters.

#### *Conflict Management Scale (Manager's immediate superior)*

This part of the questionnaire is similar to the questionnaire referred to above in its content and scaling method used. However, the difference lies in the frame of references in which questions are to be understood and answered. Managers were asked to view the preferences for conflict management methods from the immediate superior's point of view in a conflicting situation involving him and his superior.

#### *Results*

Table 1 reports means and standard deviations for conflict management methods applied by managers in two different contexts i.e. conflict management method applied by manager himself and by his immediate superior, as perceived by the same manager. This was intended to reflect discrepancy between two levels of management. Also presented are the paired t-tests indicating differences between the two position with regard to various conflict management methods.

A close scrutiny of the results concerning importance assigned to a specific method by a manager (self) showed that "Toning down differences" was given higher weightage and "Avoid argument" was preferred least as a conflict resolution strategy. The other most preferred strategies next to "Toning down differences" in terms of mean scores obtained were "Confrontation" ( $\bar{x} = 3.76$ ), "Compromise" ( $\bar{x} = 3.67$ ) and "Follow Rules" ( $\bar{x} = 3.54$ ). The least preferred methods in ascending order next to "Avoid arguments" were found to be "Forcing" ( $\bar{x} = 2.52$ ), "Consulting Others"

TABLE I

t-RATIOS FOR VARIOUS CONFLICT MANAGEMENT METHODS APPLIED BY MANAGERS AS SELF AND AS SUPERIORS

| Conflict Management Methods | Managers as Self |      | Managers as Superior |      |                 | Paired t-test |        |
|-----------------------------|------------------|------|----------------------|------|-----------------|---------------|--------|
|                             | Mean             | SD   | Mean                 | SD   | Difference Mean | SE D          | t      |
| Avoid arguments             | 2.49             | 1.22 | 2.84                 | 1.28 | 0.35            | 0.18          | 1.99*  |
| Follow rules                | 3.54             | 1.01 | 3.29                 | 1.20 | 0.25            | 0.16          | 1.61   |
| Accommodating others        | 3.18             | 0.86 | 2.71                 | 1.13 | 0.47            | 0.15          | 3.18** |
| Consulting only             | 3.15             | 1.23 | 3.13                 | 1.18 | 0.02            | 0.15          | 0.16   |
| Tone down differences       | 4.08             | 0.92 | 3.57                 | 1.08 | 0.51            | 0.13          | 3.95** |
| Forcing                     | 2.52             | 1.02 | 3.04                 | 1.26 | 0.52            | 0.17          | 3.01** |
| Compromise                  | 3.67             | 0.94 | 3.19                 | 1.08 | 0.48            | 0.11          | 4.32** |
| Confrontation               | 3.76             | 1.00 | 3.15                 | 1.16 | 0.61            | 0.14          | 4.25** |

\*P < .05.

\*\*P < .01.

( $\bar{x} = 3.15$ ) and "Accommodating Others" ( $\bar{x} = 3.18$ ). An analysis of higher category of managers (i.e. immediate superiors as perceived by manager himself) revealed that "Toning down differences" was the most preferred method whereas "Accommodating Others" was the least preferred method. The other methods which were rated as most preferred in descending order next to "Toning down differences" were found to be "Follow Rules", ( $\bar{x} = 3.29$ ), "Compromise" ( $\bar{x} = 3.19$ ) and "Confrontation" ( $\bar{x} = 3.15$ ) whereas least preferred methods next to "Accommodating Others" in ascending order were found to be "Avoid Argument" ( $\bar{x} = 2.84$ ), "Forcing" ( $\bar{x} = 3.04$ ) and "Consulting Others" ( $\bar{x} = 3.13$ ). As the results showed that there are differences in the application of conflict management methods, attempt was made to compare them through a paired t-test. The paired t-test as reported in the table alongwith difference mean, SED showed interesting findings. Six methods showed significant differences when comparison was made between conflict management techniques applied by manager as self and as immediate superior.

Compromise, Confrontation, Toning down differences, and Accomodating Others showed significant mean difference in which manager as self had higher scores than the manager as superior. With regard to Avoiding Arguments and Forcing, manager as superior showed significantly higher scores. The other two methods "Follow Rules" and "Consulting Others" had more or less similar means, as the difference between the two groups was not significant.

Table 2 reports repealed *measures* ANOVA applied to conflict management methods adopted by manager as self. Repeated measure ANOVA was specifically applied with a view to find out method variation in adopting conflict resolution

strategy by manager as self. It is interesting to note that the F-ratio for methods differences was found to be 33.23, significant well beyond .001 level of confidence. This is clearly suggestive of differential approach applied for resolving conflicts concerning job related matter in work situation of the organization. This also suggests that resolving a conflict in organizational setting can never be unidimensional as one may differentially opt for various conflict resolution methods for a given area or problem of conflict.

TABLE II

REPEATED MEASURES ANOVA APPLIED TO CONFLICT MANAGEMENT METHODS ADOPTED BY MANAGERS AS SELF

| Source of Variation | SS     | DF  | Mean Square | F     | Significance Level |
|---------------------|--------|-----|-------------|-------|--------------------|
| Between Subjects    | 194.17 | 86  | 2.26        |       |                    |
| Within Subjects     | 745.25 | 609 | 1.22        |       |                    |
| Between Methods     | 207.72 | 7   | 29.67       | 33.23 | .00001             |
| Residual            | 537.53 | 602 | 0.89        |       |                    |
| Total               | 939.42 | 695 |             |       |                    |

Table 3 reports repeated measures ANOVA applied to conflict management method adopted by manager as superior on the *same line as shown* for manager as self. The results showed significant differences between the eight methods applied ( $F = 5.25$ ,  $df, 7/602$ .  $p < .001$ ). This is again suggestive of a trend noted for manager as self.

TABLE III

REPEATED MEASURES ANOVA APPLIED TO CONFLICT MANAGEMENT METHODS ADOPTED BY MANAGERS AS SUPERIOR

| Source of Variation | SS      | DF  | Mean Square | F    | Significance Level |
|---------------------|---------|-----|-------------|------|--------------------|
| Between Subjects    | 348.30  | 86  | 4.05        |      |                    |
| Within Subjects     | 791.00  | 609 | 1.30        |      |                    |
| Between Methods     | 45.51   | 7   | 6.50        | 5.25 | .00001             |
| Residual            | 745.49  | 602 | 1.24        |      |                    |
| Total               | 1139.30 | 695 |             |      |                    |

### Discussion

Conflict management techniques have been noted as varying across hierarchical levels and in situations where superiors and subordinates are working in dyads (Renwick, 1975a). Methodologically, the present study falls in line with Renwick's approach with a slight difference. In the first place, we have taken conflicts in the context of job related matters, and in the second place, subordinate manager's perceptions have been used to account for his superior's perception concerning methods opted for resolving the conflicts.

In terms of ordinal importance of conflict management methods, there is a moderate degree of dissimilarity between the manager's own practices and his perception about his superior regarding application of conflict management techniques. The manager (as self) seems to have preferred "Toning down differences", "Confrontation" "Compromise", "Following rules", "Accommodating others", "Consulting", "Forcing" and "Avoiding arguments" while the superior prefers "Toning down differences", "Compromise", "Confrontation", "Consulting", "Forcing", "Avoiding arguments" and "Accommodating others".

The manager (as self) and the manager (as superior) seem to have preferred "Toning down differences" as the first measure of resolving conflict as and when it occurred. It appears that they might be preferring this with a view to achieve harmonious relationship. 'Smoothing over' the conflict is a superficial way of dealing with it and may ultimately lead to chaotic situations.

The second preference as indicated above is "Confrontation" for manager as self and "Following Rules" for manager as superior. This suggests that the subordinate managers do confront issues when they have no other way to do it. They also feel that their superiors prefer to deal with the conflict in a more bureaucratic way by following the rules and regulations in resolving the conflict.

The third preference is "Compromise" for the manager as self and also as superior. It suggests that if they fail in resolving the conflict by adopting the first two preferences, they would then like to bargain with each other depending upon the situation and the power, they enjoy. It is a 'give' and 'take' exercise under constraints and not a resolution of conflict in the real sense.

If we take into consideration the first three preferences of both the managers (for subordinate and superiors) it can be said that the managers at the higher level of the hierarchy are not fully equipped to deal with the conflict through "Confrontation" and, therefore, can lead the organization to chaotic situations. Further, it also appears that the middle level managers simply ditto their superior's thinking and

believe in "get going".

Our data did seem to support neither Burke (1970) nor Renwick's (1975a, 1975b) conclusions with regard to confrontation as an important technique applied by the managers. Probably, this may be due to the differences in the conflicting situation studied by Renwick and may perhaps be due to independent ratings obtained both from the superiors and the subordinates. Our data relied heavily on the perception of managers' rating for themselves as well as for their immediate superiors. As a result, our data provided useful cues with regard to superiors as they are perceived by the subordinate managers in applying conflict management techniques.

Besides this, mean differences between the two perceptions regarding application of conflict management techniques also throw considerable light. With the exception of "following rules" and "consulting" as used by managers, rest of the dimensions showed significant differences, which means that even in applying conflict management technique there is disagreement between the two. "Following rules" and "Consulting" were the dimensions on which manager as self and superior did not differ.

One more issue remains to be answered

at this juncture. As noted in the results, method variation in conflict management are consistently noted both for the superiors as well as for the subordinate managers. These findings signify that even though conflict management techniques are employed independently, superior and subordinate managers in their areas of operations differed in terms of applying conflict management methods. Apart from giving due importance to one method over the other as noted in the early part of the discussion, there is no commonality among all the eight techniques. As a result, when the superior and subordinate managers are taken separately, differences in the application of methods were noted. Probably, this may have resulted due to the nature and characteristics of the sample, which represented a wide variety of organizational settings, where different managerial orientations have been prevailing. It seems that the organizational effect as noted here, may have been minimum if the sample was drawn from a reasonably homogeneous work force. This needs to be tested in future researches on conflict management taking a homogenous sample of superior and subordinate managers from one organizational setting.

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