A Face Concern Approach to Conflict Management – A Malaysian Perspective

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Abstract: This study presents a review of conflict management from a face concern approach. It presents the various definitions on conflict and types of conflict. It further looks at how face negotiation theory explains the use of various conflict management styles in individualist and collectivist cultures. In addition, it provides some insight into conflict management from a Malaysian perspective.

Key words: Conflict, conflict management styles, face negotiation, face concerns, types of conflict

INTRODUCTION

Conflict is certain as long as there is a human element present. Thus, conflict is a pervasive aspect in both social circles and professional interactions. It is put aptly by Landau, Landau and Landau[1] when they say "Conflict exists in all human relationships: it always has and probably always will". Furthermore, individuals who never experience conflict at the workplace are "living in a dream world, blind to their surroundings or are confined to solitary confinement"[2].

Definition of conflict: With the absence of a comprehensive definition on conflict, various definitions have been provided by many researchers from multiple disciplines. Some of these have originated from disciplines such as psychology, behavioral sciences, sociology, communication and anthropology. Several researchers such as Thomas[3], Wall and Callister[4], Vecchio[5] and Rahim[6] described conflict as a process. Thomas[3] defined conflict as "the process which begins when one party perceives that the other has frustrated, or is about to frustrate, some concern of his". Wall and Callister[4] viewed conflict as "a process in which one party perceives that its interests are being opposed or negatively affected by another party". Vecchio[5] described conflict as "the process that results when one person (or a group of people) perceives that another person or group is frustrating, or about to frustrate, an important concern. Conflict involves incompatible differences between parties that result in interference or opposition". Rahim[6] looked at conflict as "an interactive process manifested in incompatibility, disagreement, or dissonance within or between social entities (i.e., individual, group, organization, etc.)".

Based on Donohue and Kolt[7], conflict is defined "as a situation in which interdependent people express (manifest or latent) differences in satisfying their individual needs and interests and they experience interference from each other in accomplishing these goals". On the other hand, conflict is also looked at as "the interaction of interdependent people who perceive opposition of goals, aims and values and who see the other party as potentially interfering with the realization of these goals"[8].

These numerous definitions show that scholars are looking at conflict from different angles. However, the common theme dominant in all these definitions are the aspects of differing needs, goals or interests and the perceived or real interference from one party unto the other party to achieve these needs, goals or interests. Perception plays an important role in conflict. If the conflict is not perceived by either party, then it does not exist. However, when the conflict is perceived, it occurs whether or not the perception is real.

Types of conflict: Though most researchers have divided conflict into two types, there have been two others who have proposed three types of conflict.

Guetzkow and Gyr[9], Kazemek[10], Amason[11], Pelled, Eisenhardt and Xin[12], Schermerhorn, Hunt and Osborn[13] and McShane and Von Glinow[14] suggested two types of conflict. The different terminologies used by them are as follows: substantive conflict and affective conflict[9]; substantive conflict and people conflict[10]; cognitive conflict and affective conflict[11]; task conflict and emotional conflict[12]; substantive conflict and emotional conflict[13]; and task-related conflicts and socioemotional conflicts[14].

Substantive conflict, cognitive conflict, task conflict or task-related conflicts refer to conflicts rooted in the substance of the task to be undertaken. It happens when people have differing views on working together. More often than not, people argue over allocation of resources, distribution of rewards, task assignments, procedures, goals and important decision areas. On the

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other hand, affective conflict, people conflict, emotional conflict or socioemotional conflict refers to emotional aspects in the interpersonal relation or personality clashes or where differences are viewed as personal attacks.

However, Evans[15] and Jehn[16] have categorized conflicts into three types. Evans[15] found three types of conflicts in his study on the superior-subordinate conflicts in a governmental and an industrial research organization. The three types of conflicts were technical conflicts in relation to disagreements over means or ends pertaining to the work, administrative conflicts referring to disagreements concerning procedures, policies and allocation of resources; and lastly interpersonal conflicts resulting from personality clashes and so on. Jehn[16] on the other hand, categorized conflict into three types as task conflicts, process conflicts and relationship conflicts. Task conflicts are conflicts focused on ideas and opinions about the task being performed while process conflicts are concerned about logistical and delegation issues such as how task is to be accomplished, who is responsible for what and how duties are to be delegated. Relationship conflict are conflicts over personal issues in which often reported are pertaining to social events, gossip, clothing preferences, political views and hobbies.

It should be noted that most studies still use the two categories of conflict instead of the three as proposed by Evans[15] and Jehn[16].The technical conflicts, administrative conflicts, task conflicts and process conflicts as suggested by them still fall under the category of task-related conflicts as they are related to work aspects.

Conflict management typologies: There are various styles that can be used to manage conflicts. Among the early writers, Follett[17] suggested three main ways to handle conflict: domination, compromise and integration. In addition, she also found others such as avoidance and suppression. Blake and Mouton[18] were the first to present the conceptualization of the five conflict styles for managing interpersonal conflict, namely: problem-solving, smoothing, forcing, withdrawal and sharing based on the dual concern model. This model focuses on the attitudes of the manager namely; concern for production and concern for people. Thomas[3] relabeled these styles as avoiding, accommodating, competing, compromising and collaborating based on two intentions of an individual; cooperativeness and assertiveness. In cooperativeness one party attempts to satisfy the other party's concerns, while in assertiveness, the party attempts to satisfy its own concern. Rahim and Bonoma[19] used the conceptualization by Blake and Mouton[18] as well as Thomas[3] to categorize conflict management styles into avoiding, obliging, dominating, compromising and integrating. Their dual concern model was based on two

orthogonal dimensions; concern for self and concern for others. There have been other terminologies provided by researchers who have also focused on the dual concern model. Conerly and Tripati's[20] model centered on how much one cared about achieving one's goals – how assertive one was and the second dimension on how much one cared about the relationships – how cooperative one was. Their proposed five conflict management styles based on these two dimensions were namely; withdrawing, forcing, smoothing, confronting and compromising. On the other hand, Masters and Albright[21] focused on what was valued: the relationship or the outcome. Based on this, they suggested five conflict management styles; avoidance, competition, accommodation, collaboration and compromise. In addition to these five conflict management styles, other researchers who have suggested two[22,23], three[24,25], four[26,27], seven[28,29], eight[30] and nine[31] styles to handle conflict.

The dual concern model was challenged by Nicotera[30]. She suggested a new model of conflict-handling behavior with three dimensions namely: attention to one's view, attention to the other's view and emotional/relational valence which resulted in eight conflict styles. However, there has not been any follow-up from this perspective. Researchers are still widely using the dual concern model in studying conflict.

Face negotiation theory: The face negotiation theory is one of the many theories used in conflict studies. This theory is used to explain the use of different conflict management styles in different cultures.

Ting-Toomy[32] defined face as the claimed sense of self-image in a relational situation. It is the way we want others to see us and treat us. "Face is a universal phenomenon as everyone would like to be respected; everyone needs a sense of self-respect. But how we manage strategies in maintaining, saving and honoring one's face differs across cultures" [33].

There are two facets to face-negotiation; face concern and face need. Face concern relates to the question of whose face a person is trying to save, his or her own or someone else's. Face need deals with whether autonomy (space and privacy) is valued, or whether inclusion (respect and approval) is the primary concern. Collectivist cultures, like some Asian countries, view others as more important and inclusion as a higher value.

Ting-Toomy[32] used the face negotiation theory to explain the differences in conflict management styles in individualistic and collectivist cultures. She suggested that individualists tended to value autonomy face needs and self-concern face needs, whereas collectivists emphasize approval face needs and other-concern or mutual-concern face needs. She found that collectivists value harmonious interpersonal relationships with others and show concern for face saving thus using indirect conflict styles.

This theory emphasizes three face concerns; self-face, other-face and mutual-face. Self-face is the concern for the individual's own image, other face is the concern for the other's image and mutual-face is concern for both parties' images[34]. Facework is utilized to manage these concerns; self, other and mutual, during a conflict. "Facework is employed to resolve a conflict, exacerbate a conflict, avoid a conflict, threaten or challenge another person, protect a person's image, etc. These functions are part of the process of maintaining and upholding face. Facework focuses on relational, identity and substantive issues during conflict"[34].

This theory can explain the use of the various conflict management styles according to the mix of concern for self-face and other-face. The dominating style is deemed as reflective of self-face, avoiding and obliging styles as reflective of other-face and compromising as well as integrating styles as reflective of mutual-face[35]. This is similar to the dual concern model of conflict, with the emphasis on concern for self and concern for the other party.

A Malaysian perspective: Looking at this from a Malaysian viewpoint, face concerns are important within the Malaysian context. Though the Malaysian workforce is a very diverse workforce (predominately by three races of different ethnic origins, Malays, Chinese and Indians), these ethnic groups have been able to retain their own identity and live in harmony with others. Abdullah[36] and Poon[37] posited that though these ethnic groups share some common beliefs and values such as deference to authority, respect for elders, more emphasis on "we" than "I", harmonious relationships and concern for face saving, they have distinct cultural, religious heritages. In addition, Abdullah[38] stated that "As relationships are personalized, face is important and needs to be preserved because of the overriding aim of maintaining social harmony and cordial relationships… If face is preserved, interpersonal relations will be smoothened and harmony and respect will be maintained". Malaysians are more collectivist than individualist. This may be deduced from the group orientation, concern for others, loyalty and trust, sense of belonging, compromising and relationship orientation which are valued by them. They have a high degree of 'we' orientation as compared to 'I' orientation[36]. Furthermore, Malaysia has a low individualism score of 26 which typifies it as a country of a more collectivist nature[39]. Members of such a culture have a higher level of other-face concerns than self-face concerns and thus use more avoiding or obliging conflict management styles as compared to members of individualistic cultures[40].

In a Malaysian work environment context, managers are unlikely to be challenged or criticized by their subordinates. Subordinates do not challenge or even clarify judgments because of their deference to their superiors; an indication of respect for seniors and face-saving. A manager, on the other hand, who makes his subordinate lose face in public, is seen as arrogant and rude. This face-giving involves showing concern for others and taking care not to embarrass or humiliate the other in public. "Face-giving is the characteristic face strategy across collectivist culture"[41], whereas people in individualist culture use self-face as they are more concerned in protecting and restoring their own public self-image. Since Malaysian managers value harmony, face and relationships, they tend to adopt an open and friendly approach towards their subordinates[42].

In addition, researchers[38,43,44] reported of the low importance placed on assertiveness in a Malaysian setting, as the culture discouraged individual displays of assertiveness or confrontational behavior. Abdullah[45] found that Malaysians disliked aggressive behavior, brashness and insensitiveness. Malaysian managers preferred more relationship-based approaches. Thus, Malaysians would prefer to choose consensus and compromise than confrontation, which are among some of the values held strongly by Malaysians. Malaysians tended to use 'verbal seduction' where the assertiveness involved being indirect, or soft and gentle[46].

Face-saving approaches are still very much in favor among Malaysian middle level managers in business organizations to maintain good relationships[47]. Thus, these managers tended to avoid making negative comments and more often than not, they used metaphors and examples to communicate than go straight to the point which is similar to the 'verbal seduction'.

A study on Malaysian managers showed that they scored significantly high in the integrating style, followed by compromising and obliging[48]. However, they scored significantly lower in the dominating and avoiding styles. Other studies reported that the majority of executives in the Malaysian public and private sector used the integrating style to handle interpersonal conflicts with their superiors, peers and subordinates[49,50]. Other studies also reported similar findings with the integrating style and the compromising style being the more favored conflict management styles[51,52,53].

A recent empirical study was conducted by Suppiah[54] among public sector managers in Malaysia to determine the conflict management styles used to handle interpersonal conflicts with their subordinates. She reported that a high percentage (65.5%) of the managers used integrating style to handle interpersonal conflicts with their subordinates followed by the compromising style (23.8%). An insignificant percentage was the dominating style (5.0%) and the avoiding style (4.2%). The least used style was the obliging style (1.5%).

Her findings are in line with Abdullah's[45] opinion that Malaysians disliked aggressive behavior, preferred more relationship-based approaches and chose consensus and compromise than confrontation. As such, the integrating style and compromising style fitted into this category.

Suppiah's[54] findings support Ting-Toomy's[32] face negotiation theory where she stated that in collectivist culture, mutual-concern face needs (integrating style and compromising style) or other-concern face needs (avoiding style and obliging style) were emphasized. She found that the majority (89.3%) of the respondents displayed mutual-face concern styles which included the integrating style and the compromising style while 5.7% displayed other-concern face styles (avoiding style and obliging style). An insignificant number (5.0%) of respondents showed a self-concern face style (dominating style).

Suppiah[54] found the compromising style to be the second significant style after the integrating style which concurs with findings by Tamam *et al.*[50]. Gill[43] asserted that Malaysians had a tendency to use the 'give and take approach' to handle conflicts as it was considered to be a 'win-win' approach. Besides, Kabanoff[55] posited that individuals who used the compromising style were influenced by their positive evaluation of cooperation. Thus, those who used such cooperative styles placed importance on relationship-maintenance aspects for future dealings[55-57]. Kabanoff[55] found that subjects believed that their willingness to sacrifice some of their own concern for the other person's concern was seen as being not only cooperative but as being strong as well. In addition, Cai and Fink[58] reported that those from collectivists society preferred compromising and integrating. In contrast, Said[49] found the obliging style to be the second significant style after the integrating style.

Both Said[49] and Tamam *et al.*[50] found the dominating style to be the least used style, followed by avoiding style and compromising style. Other studies also reported the dominating style and the avoiding style to be the less favored conflict management styles[51-53]. However, Suppiah[54] found the obliging to be the least used style followed by avoiding and dominating. The low usage of the obliging style was possibly due to the fact that managers would not be able to achieve their goals if they gave in to their subordinate's wishes in the work environment. In addition, Malaysia had a high power distance score of 104[39]. Power distance reflects the "degree to which society accepts that power in institutions and organizations were distributed unequally and every one has a rightful place in it"[59]. As such, the managers might feel that since they are in a superior position, they need not oblige their subordinates who are in the lower position as supported by Hofstede[39] when he posited that in "large power distance situations superiors and subordinates consider each other as existentially unequal; the hierarchical system is felt to be based on this existentially inequality". Besides, Malaysians were generally willing to accept that inequality in power was normal[36].

CONCLUSION

The face concern negotiation theory is a useful theory that can be utilized to explain the use of different conflict management styles by individuals. Individuals who are dealing conflict with their Eastern counterpart should be made aware of these face concerns. Knowledge of such matters would lead to a better understanding and thus lead to fewer problems in handling conflicts. It should be noted that Malaysians were still placing due importance to face concerns as well as fostering harmonious relationships. Thus, the issue of relation maintenance is important within a Malaysian working environment to ensure a continuous and sustainable working relationship.

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