EFFECTS OF JOB STATUS AND ISSUE OF CONFLICT ON THE USE OF CONFLICT HANDLING STRATEGIES

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The study examined the effects of job status and the issue of conflict on the use of conflict handling strategies. Eighty Indian engineering undergraduates participated in role-playing situations. They were assigned to the role of either a superior or a subordinate and were placed in an organizational or a persona! situation of conflict. A 2X2 analysis *of* variance revealed new insights into the area *of* conflict management, although the results clearly contradicted the hypothesized relations.

The pervasiveness of conflict is perhaps nowhere more evident than in organizations. Conflict is an inevitable part of any kind of interaction and arises as a result of incompatible demands of individuals, groups, or organizations. The voluminous literature of conflict reveals a transition from "conflict reduction" or "conflict elimination" to "conflict management." The notion of "'management" implies not only an effective harnessing and an optimal maintenance of conflict but also a handling of the same through appropriate styles of behavior.

Attempts have been made to identify effective strategies (styles) of managing

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conflict (Blake & Mouton, 1964; Hall, 1969; Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967; Thomas, 1976). Based on these attempts and using two basic dimensions, Rahim and Bonoma (1979) delineated five styles of handling interpersonal conflicts. The first dimension, *concern for self,* refers to the degree (high/low) to which a person attempts to satisfy one's own concerns. The second dimension, *concern for others,* refers to the degree (high/low) to which a person wants to satisfy the concern of others (Rahim & Bonoma, 1979). The styles thus emerging are integrating, obliging, compromising, dominating, and avoiding. The advantage of using one style over the other remains a debatable issue. While some researchers (e.g., Blake & Mouton, 1964; Burke, 1969; Likert & Likert, 1976) have recommended the use of problem-solving or integrating style for managing conflict, others (e.g., Rahim & Bonoma, 1979; Thomas, 1977) have

suggested that one style may be more effective than another depending upon the situation. With a few exceptions (Burke, 1970; Musser, 1982; Renwick, 1977), conflict management has been viewed solely as the strategies used by the superiors. Since a great deal of conflict is hierarchic in nature, a knowledge of subordinates' styles of handling conflict is also essential.

The present study attempts to incorporate both the superior's and the subordinate's attempts at conflict management. Specifically, it examines the effects of job status (superior/subordinate) and issue of conflict (personal/organizational) on the subjects' use of conflict handling styles. Barring a few studies (Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, & Rosenthal, 1964; Phillips & Cheston, 1979; Rahim, 1983), conflict management has not been systematically studied in relation to job status. According to Kahn et al. (1964), managers are more likely to use the avoiding style with superiors than with peers, and more with peers than subordinates. On the other hand, a forcing or dominating approach is more common for handling differences with subordinates than with peers, and much less common with superiors (Philips & Cheston, 1979). Rahim (1983) reported that individuals are more obliging with their superiors and integrating and compromising with their subordinates and peers. On the basis of these findings, it is hypothesized that conflict handling styles vary as a function of job status. Specifically, *subjects are more likely to employ avoiding and obliging styles with their superior and dominating style with their subordinates.*

One line of thought seeks to classify conflict in terms of the antecedent conditions that lead to conflict. In this typology, goal conflict is said to occur when the end-state of two parties involved is inconsistent (Cosier & Rose, 1977). Though a classification of conflict is based on the sources of conflict, little has been performed to determine the effect of goals/issues on conflict handling styles. Yet, some clues can be obtained from studies conducted on social influence strategies. Kipnis and Schmidt (1983) clearly point to the fact that managers vary their influence strategies in relation to their objectives of influence attempts. They are more likely to use strong tactics like assertiveness to obtain organizational goals and softer techniques such as ingratiation for achieving personal goals. Similarly, Ansari & Kapoor (1987) found that subjects used ingratiation to pursue personal goals and both rational and non-rational tactics to attain organizational goals. In line with these studies, it is hypothesized that, *irrespective of who the target person is (superior/subordinate), subjects are more likely to employ obliging and compromising strategies when the issue is personal, and dominating strategy when the issue is organizational.*

Although the main effects of job status and the issue of conflict are being predicted, it is possible that the two factors may interact in determining the use of conflict handling strategies. It is expected that *subjects employ compromising and obliging strategies with the superior and a compromising strategy with the subordinate when the issue of conflict is personal. On the other hand, subjects may display a greater use of compromising style with the superior and dominating style with the subordinate when the issue of conflict is organizational.*

Method

Subjects

The subjects were 80 male engineering undergraduates at the Indian

Institute of Technology Kanpur, ranging in age from 20 to 23, with a mean of 21.69 years; their participation in the research was completely voluntary. Data were collected in the fall of 1987.

Experimental Manipulations

The study employed four different hypothetical role-playing scenarios. The issue of conflict was manipulated as follows: For the *organizational issue*, the issue depicted in the scenario was understaffing, where the subordinate asked for additional personnel to share the work and the superior was not agreeable to it. The *personal issue* incorporated the subordinate's promotion which was resisted by the superior. Secondly, the job status was varied by including in the scenarios both the superior's and the subordinate's viewpoints for the conflicting situations.

Design and Procedure

The study employed a 2 x 2 orthogonal design, with two issues of conflict (organizational/personal) and two job status (superior/subordinate). The subjects were randomly assigned to the four treatment conditions, with 20 subjects per cell. The subject was asked to read the scenario and then to respond to the dependent measures and manipulation check items.

Dependent Measures

Twenty single-statement items were drawn from the recent work by Rahim (1983) to assess the five styles of handling interpersonal conflict: integrating (7 items), obliging (5 items), compromising (3 items), dominating (3 items), and avoiding (2 items). The subject described on a 9-point scale (1 = *certainly would not do this;* 9 = cer*tainly would do this*) the likelihood of his engaging in the behaviors indicated by the scale items.

Descriptive statistics, reliability coefficients, and intercorrelations among the dependent measures are displayed in Table 1. As can be seen, the five scales exhibited fairly adequate reliability

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics, Cronbach's Coefficients Alphas, and Pearson Correlations

Strategy	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1 Integrating	6.68	1.31	**82**				
2 Obliging	4.80	1.31	28	**76**			
3 Compromising	5.71	1.51	27	31	**85**		
4 Dominating	4.76	1.70	-10	-02	15	**71**	
5 Avoiding	6.58	1.54	38	32	25	-10	**80**

Note. Decimal points in correlation matrix and alpha are omitted; diagonal entries are reliability coefficients; r (78) = .22 at p < .05; r(78) = .28 at p < .01.

coefficients (ranging between .71 and .85). In addition, the scales were only moderately intercorrelated (average r = .17), indicating a strong independence of the scales. Mean factor scores for each subject were computed by adding the item responses and dividing the sum by the number of items on the factor.

Results

The study ascertains the check on experimental manipulation of conflict by employing a 2-item post-experimental questionnaire: (a) unpleasant-pleasant and (b) tense-relaxed. Subjects described the overall impression of their relationship with the target person (superior/subordinate) depicted in the scenario using these items, each rated on a 7-point semantic-differential scale. The items are found to be highly interrelated (r = .70). The analysis for each scenario indicates an average rating of 4.95, suggesting a perception of conflict by the subjects. The analysis also indicates that none of the

dependent measures significantly correlates with any of the manipulation check items, thereby suggesting that the observed effects of independent variables are unaffected by the manipulation check items.

To address the effects of job status and conflict issue, the five conflict handling strategies were subjected to separate 2 x 2 *ANOVA*. Mean scores on conflict handling strategies are presented in Table 2. Both the main and interaction effects of job status and issue of conflict

Table 2

Mean Scores on Conflict Handling Strategies

	Conflict Strategies				
	IN	OB	CO	DO	AV
Subordinate Role					
Organizational Issue	6.99	4.55	5.73	4.58	6.43
Personal Issue	7.24	5.01	5.42	4.67	6.83
Superior *Role*					
Organizational Issue	5.61	5.12	6.60	5.12	7.03
Personal Issue	5.89	4.53	5.10	4.67	6.05
By factor					
Subordinate Role	7.12	4.78	5.58	4.63	6.63
Superior Role	6.25	4.83	5.85	4.89	6.54
Organizational Issue	6.30	4.84	6.17	4.85	6.73
Personal Issue	5.57	4.77	5.26	4.67	6.44

Note. IN = Integrating; OB = Obliging; CO =Compromising; DO = Dominating; AV = Avoiding.

on conflict handling styles are apparent in the analysis. The main effect of referent role is significant for the integrating style of handling conflict, $F(1, 76) = 10.13$, $p < .01$. Subjects are found to display a greater use of integration for the superior than for the subordinate. The

effect of the issue of conflict also appears to be significant in the use of compromising style, $F(1, 76) = 7.75$, $p < .01$. The analysis suggests that subjects display a greater likelihood of using compromise for the organizational issues than for the personal issue.

The interaction between referent role and the issue of conflict is found to be significant for avoiding as a handling strategy, $F(1, 76) = 4.06$, $p < .05$. Subjects show a greater likelihood of using avoiding style for the superior when the issue is personal and for the subordinate when the issue is organizational. Conversely, they show a less likelihood of using this strategy for the superior for organizational issue and for the subordinate for personal issue.

Discussion

The obtained results are clearly in contradiction with the hypothesized relations. A substantially greater use of integration for the superior by the subjects, though not in congruence with the traditional conjectures, can be explained in terms of resource distribution. Rahim (1986), while delineating the appropriate/inappropriate situations for the use of different handling styles of conflict, considers the use of integrating style appropriate for situations where resources of both (all) parties involved are needed. In the context of a superior-subordinate conflict, presumably the superior is perceived to have more resources in terms of power, authority, and information; hence, the use of integrating style for the superior by the subjects seems to be appropriate.

The issue of conflict hypothesis reveals a greater use of compromising style for the organizational goal--a finding again inconsistent with the hypothesis. However, it can be explained in terms of

the importance attached by the subjects to each of the issues. The organizational issue of understaffing probably is not considered more important by the subjects than the personal goal of promotion. In such a case, the compromising mode for the organizational issue seems an appropriate choice.

The finding of interaction effect is rather difficult to explain. All the same, the explanation is sought in the nature of the issues involved. Since the personal issue is promotion of the subordinate and concerns the subordinate more from both the perspectives, the subject as subordinate avoids any confrontation with the superior and probably postpones the issue for a better time. From the superior perspective, a greater use of avoiding style for the organizational issue for the subordinate can be seen as smugness on the part of the subject while playing the role of a superior.

Although a considerable amount of research has been directed towards conflict management in organizations, a lot more needs to be done in the field to arrive at some general conclusions. Since the inevitability of conflict in organizations cannot be denied, a proper understanding of the dynamics of handling styles is a must for effective intervention. With this view in mind, hierarchic conflict needs to be studied both from the subordinates' and the superiors' perspectives of handling the conflict. The inherent limitations of a study of this design preclude meaningful exploration of some of the alternative explanations. Clearly, the study is not a sufficient basis for the establishment of general laws. But, just as clearly, the findings cannot be ignored completely. Obviously, the many questions raised by this study can only be properly answered by future experimental and field studies designed to explore the circumstances under which the individual chooses one style of handling differences over another.

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