CONFLICT HANDLING BEHAVIOUR:
A STUDY ON ADMINISTRATIVE AND DIPLOMATIC OFFICER

By

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I hereby declare that this research is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. Other sources are acknowledged by footnotes giving explicit references and a bibliography is appended.

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Date : 

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ABSTRACT

Interpersonal conflict-handling styles of PTD officers in Sarawak was studied using self-administered questionnaires. The survey yielded that the integrating style, followed closely by compromising style were the two most popular styles used by the said officers, regardless of the party involved – superiors, subordinates or peers. The dominating style was clearly showed that it is the least preferred style in handling conflict. The study also revealed that compromising was preferred to obliging and avoiding in confronting conflict situation.

At the end of this study showed that PTD officers in civil service, more towards using integrating and compromising style, making it different from western society which is more individualistic-oriented, thus preferring dominating and obliging style.
1. Introduction

1.1 Background Study

As the pace of life and business continue to accelerate, the opportunities for conflict multiply. Meaning to say that the potential for conflict will continue to grow exponentially as the pace of our society continues to accelerate. With explosive technological advances come avalanche of change. Change brings uncertainty, fear and discomfort, which is fertile ground for conflict. As a result, conflict resolution skills that were an advantage in the late 20TH century are essential for the mere survival in the 21st century.

Managing conflicts is one of the important functions of modern day management. Organizational conflicts need to be managed not because it is inherently bad but because modern organizations survive on conflicts. It is only in the traditional organizations that conflicts are taken as organizationally disruptive activities and hence need to be avoided, and if possible, suppressed and controlled. As we know, perfection is rare while pitfalls, shortcomings and shortages are the part of the everyday reality. Therefore conflicts are inevitable. The best approach to deal with conflicts is to successfully manage them.

Few of us enjoy dealing with conflict- either with bosses, peers, subordinates, friends or strangers. This is particularly true when the conflict becomes hostile and when strong feelings become involved. Resolving and managing conflict can be mentally exhausting and emotionally draining.
There is a tendency to think about conflict or negotiating situation as an isolated incident. It is probably more useful to think about conflict as a process, or a complex series of event over time involving both external factors and internal social and psychological factors. Conflict episodes typically are affected by preceding and in turn produce results and outcomes that affect the conflict dynamics.

A negotiation usually involves a number of steps including the exchange of proposals and counter proposals. In good-faith negotiation, both sides are expected to make offers and concessions. Your goal here is not only try to solve the problem, but to gain information that will enable you to get a clearer notion of what the true issues might be and how your "opponent" sees reality. Through offers and counter offers there should be a goal of a lot of information exchange that might yield a common definition of the problem.

Such an approach suggests the importance of perception—conflict is in the eye of the beholder. Thus, situation which to an outside observer should produce conflict may not if the parties either ignore or choose to ignore the conflict situation. Conversely, people can perceive a conflict situation when in reality there is none.

Conflict by itself cannot be labeled good or bad. What is essential is their consequences. Conflicts may bring in positive payoffs. They may come as a blessing in disguise. Where conflicts bring in positive payoffs, it is far better to encourage and stimulate them. The absence of conflicts may reflect the situation of high dependency, yesmanism, narrow visionary, excessive conformity and finally organization stagnation. However, there are also the dangers of excessive conflicts. Conflicts may distort perceptions, stop communication, and produce violence, sabotage and chaos in the organizations. Do remember that electrical light is produced through the conflicts of
“positive” and “negative” charges. Some positive payoffs from conflicts are experiential learning, internalization of the problems by the parties to the conflict, vigilance and self-appraisal, increased motivation, group cohesiveness, increased knowledge or skill, enhanced creativity and wider public participation in the decision making. Whereas, potential negative effects of conflict are secrecy and reduced information flow, erosion of trust, decreased productivity and morale problems.

Obviously, learning to handle conflict effectively is critical. Before immersing in conflict management techniques, some common misconceptions about conflict among staff is a sign of low concern for the organization, anger is always negative and destructive, the presence of conflict in an organization is a sign of a poor manager and conflict, if left alone, will take care of itself.

The management of conflict is also an important dimension of team effectiveness. Conflict is a natural part of the team environment, and to be effective, teams must be able to manage that conflict and how they do so brings out the best or the worst of employee involvement. Successfully teams use conflicts to arouse discussion and stimulate creative thinking. Less successful teams do a poor job of managing differences. These teams tend to avoid conflict.

1.2 Problem Statement

As conflict is a sensitive issue, the knowledge concerning conflict and the conflict and the conflict management in Malaysian Civil Service is crucial in ensuring the success of organizational operations especially in our effort to bring our service towards world class civil service. Studies on conflict management in Malaysia is very much lacking and a large number of studies on negotiation, bargaining, mediation, and arbitration fall into conflict resolution strategy, not conflict management.
Conflict management is one of the types of communication in organizations and it is an important dimension of team effectiveness. Through this study using quantitative analysis and deductive method, we hope to highlight some important aspects on how civil servants, namely PTD officers, handle conflict management especially when confronting the issues with their superior, subordinate and peer.

1.3 **Objective of the Study**

The primary objective of this study is to examine the conflict-handling styles of “dominance” officers in Malaysian Civil Service – namely Administrative and Diplomatic Officer/Pegawai Tadbir dan Diplomatik (thereafter referred as PTD). The officers involved in this are those in grade JUSA, M1, M2, and M3 under New Remuneration System/Sistem Saraan Baru introduced by Public Service Department for civil servants since 1992 and all of them are currently in Sarawak in various federal departments and in various capacity. Beginning November 2002, the government will introduce Malaysia Remuneration System/Sistem Saraan Malaysia as a continual improvement over the present system.

As conflict is a sensitive issue, the knowledge concerning conflict and the conflict management in Malaysia Civil Service is crucial in ensuring the success of organizational operations especially in our effort to bring our service towards world class civil service.

1.4 **Significance of Study**

Through this study, hopefully we can add some literatures to managerial issues, especially in conflict handling which is very much lacking in research. Due to the very fast changing environment, PTD officers as a “frontline” in civil service, must be well prepared and well organized in
dealing with dynamics changes around them. Multiskillings and multitasking is a must. One of the skill is conflict handling.

At the most general level, the new dynamics should induce deep rethinking among policy makers, specially on how to participate effectively in a new world characterized by changing rules of the game. It includes reframing their experiences (Bolman & Deal, 1997) to avoid championing wrong strategies or tackling wrong problems. Managers have to avoid doing what they know when they don’t know what to do.

1.5 Limitation

A first limitation of the present study is that measurement obtained by using self-report, forced-choice inventory questionnaire and not real or natural conflict interaction. A second limitation is that this study examined only five styles. Van de Vliert et.al. (1994, 1995) used seven behavioral components, adding process controlling and confronting, to the well known five styles. The patterns of conflict style identified in this exploratory study are thus suggestive, not definitive description of conflict behaviors. A third limitation is the use of same source respondents to both inventories may have contributed to common method variance. A fifth limitation is the sampling is limited to those PTD officers in Sarawak only, so the result may not be applicable to all PTD officers in Malaysia. A sixth limitation is these findings are based solely on self-report questionnaire and it is unclear if people can assess their own behavior especially in conflict handling modes.
2.0 Literature Review

Managers are required to deal with difference conflict situations almost routinely. One study showed that about 20 percent of manager’s time in conflict management (Thomas and Schmidt, 1976, p.318). Egan(1985) reported that middle managers spent more than 25 percent of their time managing some sort of conflict.

Even though conflict is often said to be functional for organizations, most recommendations relating to organizational conflicts still fall within the spectrum of conflict resolution. Conflict resolution implies reduction, elimination or termination of conflict. A large number of studies on negotiation, bargaining, mediation and arbitration fall into the conflict resolution strategy. Positive consequences of conflict have been noted by several scholars e.g. Johnson, 1986; Rahim, 1985; Volkema and Bergmann, 1989)

Johnson (1986) asserts that an interpersonal conflict exists whenever an action by one person prevents, obstructs or interferes with an action of another person. Interpersonal conflict situation can be identified through these characteristics: the people are interdependent, the people perceive that they seek different outcomes or they favor different means to the same ends, the conflict has the potential to negatively affect the relationship if not addressed, and there is a sense of urgency about the need to resolve the issue.

Conflict management is one of the types of communication in organizations. Rahim(1985) stated that conflict management differs from conflict resolution whereas Egan(1985) stated avoiding conflict is tantamount to avoiding opportunities for growth. Egan(1985) stated that
consciously or unconsciously tend to prefer one style to another, regardless of the situation. Bebee and Masterson (1994) mentioned that research suggests that each of us has predicted ways of managing disagreement with others.

Renwick (1975) identified causes of intra-organizational conflict: differences in knowledge, beliefs, or basic values, competition for a position, or for a recognition, a need to release tension, drive for autonomy, personal dislike and differing perceptions and attitudes generated by the structure of the organization. Rahim (1986a) proposed six categories for sources of organizational conflict: affective conflict, conflict of interest, conflict of values, cognitive conflict, goal conflict, and substantive conflict. Knapp, Putnam, & Davis (1988, p. 423) regarded organizational conflict to “heterogeneity of the workforce, environmental changes, differences in goals, diverse economic interests, differential role structure, conflict group loyalties and value discrepancies in organization.”

An awareness of the amount of conflict and style of handling it is crucial to a comprehensive understanding of organizational conflict management (Rahim, 1985, 1986a). Conflict is defined as an “interactive process manifested in incompatibility, disagreement, or dissonance within or between social entities” (Rahim, 1992, p. 16). Interpersonal conflicts tend to occur when individuals perceived that others are preventing them from attaining their goals. Satisfying one’s needs or interests is an important outcome in the conflict resolution process. This has becomes a challenge when parties in the conflict want opposing needs or interest satisfied. Researchers have studied five different approaches to handling interpersonal conflict (Blake & Mouton, 1984; Thomas, 1976). Rahim (1983) has classified five styles of handling conflict as integrating, obliging, dominating, avoiding, and compromising. Some scholars suggest a contingency approach to handling conflicts, meaning that the appropriateness of using a particular style depends on the conflict situation (Rahim, 1992). Notably, the contingency
conflict situation (Rahim, 1992). Notably, the contingency approach fails to acknowledge that some individuals may not be flexible enough to use whichever style is best for a particular situation. For example, it may be best in some conflict situations, where the issue is not that important or the timing is wrong, to simply allow others to get their needs met and without worrying about getting one's own needs met. However, someone with personality factors such as low agreeableness and high extraversion may have a propensity to use a dominating style. Thomas (1976) was aware of this possibility and ask the question, "Does the general make up of either party predispose him toward the use of specific conflict-handling modes (style)?" (p. 928).

There have a very good literature on the styles of handling interpersonal conflict (Black & Mouton, 1964; Follett, 1940; Rahim 1983,1992; Rahim & Bonoma, 1979; Rahim & Psenicka, 1984; Psenicka & Rahim, 1989; Thomas, 1976,1992). Decades ago Follett identified three main ways of dealing with conflict – domination, compromise, and integration – as well as secondary ways including avoidance and suppression. Later, Blake and Mouton (1964) were the first to present a grid for classifying the modes for handling interpersonal conflicts into five types: forcing, withdrawal, smoothing, compromise, and confrontation. The five modes of handling conflict were classified along two dimensions related to the attitudes of the manager: concern for people and concern for production. This classification was reinterpreted and refined by Thomas (1976) considered the cooperativeness and assertiveness in classifying those modes.

Rahim and Bonoma (1979) differentiated the style of handling interpersonal conflict along two dimensions: concern for self and concern for others. The first dimension explained the degree (high or low) to which a person attempts to satisfy his or her own concerns. The second dimension explains the degree (high or low) to which a person attempts to satisfy the concern of others
Van de Vliert and Kabanoff (1990) support these dimensions. Combination of the two dimensions results in five styles of handling interpersonal conflict, such as integrating, obliging, dominating, and avoiding, and compromising (Rahim & Bonoma, 1979). Many studies in various countries have established the construct validity of these styles of handling interpersonal conflict in organizational and social contexts (Rahim & Magner, 1995; Ting-Loomey et al., 1991; Lee, 1990).

Pruitt (1983) provided empirical evidence from laboratory studies that there are four style of handling conflict: yielding (obliging), problem solving (integrating), inaction (avoiding), and contending (dominating) – based on the dual-concern model and this model does not recognize compromising as a distinct style. Pruitt (1983) and Pruitt and Carnevale (1992) provide evidence that problem solving (integrating) style is the best for managing conflict.

The present study uses the conceptualization and operationalization of the five styles of handling conflict by Rahim (1983) and Rahim and Bonoma (1979) as shown below:

**Integrating**
This style involves high concern for self as well as other party involved in conflict. It is concerned with collaboration between parties (i.e. openness, exchange of information, and examination of differences) to reach a solution acceptable to both parties. This style is associated with high assertiveness and high cooperativeness. The goal is to “find win-win solution”. It is a preference for solving problems and developing mutually satisfying agreements. The integrator or collaborator has self-interests but respects the other’s interests, needs and goals. Although it may involve confronting differences, collaboration requires a problem-solving attitude and includes sharing information about everyone’s needs, goals and interests.
confronting differences, collaboration requires a problem-solving attitude and includes sharing information about everyone’s needs, goals and interests.

Obliging
This style involves low concern for self and high concern for the others. An obliging person attempts to play down the differences and emphasizes commonalities to satisfy the concerns of the other party. This style is associated with low assertiveness and high cooperativeness (accommodating). The goal is to “yield”. Those using this approach prefer to maintain the illusion of harmony. As a result, conflict issues are often suppressed or postponed because those choosing this style do not want to risk ill feelings by clarifying and resolving problems. An “accommodator” is one so concerned about the relationship and the other person that he or she suppresses personal needs, interests, and goals, and thus, does not “make waves.” Although the “accommodator” partner may derive considerable personal growth and satisfaction, actually the two are pursuing divergent paths because the “accommodator” is not deriving the same benefits from the relationship.

Dominating
This style is associated high assertiveness and low cooperativeness (competing). The goal is to “win”. It is a preference for dominating and forcing one’s decision on others. Those who use competitive style are not necessarily uncaring about others, but they value their self-interests or getting job done more than they value how other people feel about the situation. In situation of crisis, a competitive may be useful, but over long term, those who are subjected to it are likely to feel disenfranchised from decision making. Because the objective is “win-lose” in favor of oneself, one gains at the other’s expense (zero-sum game). Those who use this style appear to others as argumentative, selfish, and confrontational.
that no one totally wins or loses. They are interested in finding workable rather than optimal solutions. Compromise can contribute positively to the outcomes in a conflict situation, especially in situations in which all parties cannot get exactly what they want. This style also can contribute negatively to the outcomes if all parties exchange offers and make concessions but walk away from the conflict unsatisfied and feeling that little was accomplished. As a style favoring trade-offs involving “give and take,” it is designed to be a realistic attempt to seek an acceptable (but not necessarily preferred) solution of gains and losses for everyone involved. This style is not ideal because, regardless of the initial objective, in the end neither party may win using it—both lose at least some of what they hope to achieve.

Avoiding
This style is associated with low assertiveness and low cooperativeness. The goal is to “delay”. The avoider does not place a high value on either self or others. This is a “don’t-rock-the-boat” style. Avoidance is a preference for not addressing a conflict at all. People who avoid conflict may understand intuitively that confronting others might bring about better results, but they are not sufficiently concerned about getting those results to risk doing the conflict. They do not care enough about their relationship and they may use procedures and routines to circumvent conflict situations by insisting that the rules be followed. By referring to rules and procedures, people can remove themselves from personal involvement in the situation (e.g., “I am just doing my job—this is what is supposed to happen”). Behaviors indicative of this style include choosing to withdraw, being physically absent, avoiding issues, or remaining silent. This style include passing the buck or sidestepping an issue. An individual using this style will withdraw from the events, leaving others to struggle with the results.

According to Graham (1998), integration is always superior to compromise in managing disputes. A compromise by definition fails to give either party all that it wanted—thus it is inferior to an integrative (win-win) solution. Putnam and Wilson (1982) suggested that the choice conflict management
style will withdraw from the events, leaving others to struggle with the results.

According to Graham (1998), integration is always superior to compromise in managing disputes. A compromise by definition fails to give either party all that it wanted—thus it is inferior to an integrative (win-win) solution. Putnam and Wilson (1982) suggested that the choice conflict management style is affected by the assessment of the situation and its potential long-term implications. The selection of conflict management strategies is influenced by the characteristics of the target’s power position.

Through all those definitions, I am trying to put my own definition on conflict. Conflict occurs when the interests of two or more parties or individuals are incompatible in terms of different viewing on perceptions, behavior and understanding or when there is a conflict of interests or what one wants isn’t necessarily what the other wants and where both sides prefer to search for solutions, rather than giving in or breaking-off contact.

In the local context, Asma Abdullah (2001), in her study found that collectivism and collaboration (integrating) are some of the ethnic values pursued by Malaysian managers compared to Western managers. Others key values underlying management practices in managing conflict are non-confrontational, harmony, respect for others, especially seniors; and preserving face or avoiding embarrassment to others, loyalty, respect for authority and hierarchy.

Saran Kaur Gill (2001) found that there is a tendency for Malaysians to handle conflicts either by reaching a compromise or avoiding it altogether. Conflict situations are often worked out on the basis of compromise—“This time I give in to you, next time you give in to me.” There is
executives found that the integrating style and the compromising style were the preferred modes of handling interpersonal conflict.
Table 1

Mean Score on Interpersonal Conflict Handling Styles Among PTD Officers in Sarawak (N = 60)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conflict With</th>
<th>1N</th>
<th>CO</th>
<th>OB</th>
<th>AV</th>
<th>DO</th>
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<tr>
<td>Superior</td>
<td>4.02</td>
<td>3.49</td>
<td>3.73</td>
<td>3.35</td>
<td>2.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subordinate</td>
<td>4.04</td>
<td>3.43</td>
<td>3.30</td>
<td>3.12</td>
<td>3.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer</td>
<td>3.90</td>
<td>3.48</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>3.24</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>3.99</td>
<td>3.47</td>
<td>3.43</td>
<td>3.24</td>
<td>2.93</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note:

A higher value representing greater use of a conflict style

1N - Integrating          OB - Obliging        DO - Dominating
CO - Compromising         AV - Avoiding
The Joint Outcome Space

\[ \text{Degree of Satisfaction of the Other's Concern (Cooperativeness)} \]

\[ \text{High} \]

A Win-Lose

Competing

Noble-self

Win-Win (integrative)

C Collaborating

Ambivalent

Compromise

E Rhetorical Sensitive

Avoiding

Lose-lose

D Lose-Win

B

Low

High

1From 'Conflict and Conflict Management by K.W. Thomas, 1976. In M.D. Dunnette (ed) Handbook of Industrial and Organizational Psychology. Adapted by permission.
CHAPTER THREE

3.0 Research Methodology

The Malaysian workplace is made up of a diverse multicultural workforce and manager have to understand the cultural diversity and sensitivity in various aspects from food preferences and linguistic differences to religious beliefs and traditions. Individual and cultural differences are bound to arise and this may lead to conflict. Hence, the ability to manage conflict in organizations is an essential skill for manager in Malaysia.

The purpose of this study is to examine Administrative and Diplomatic Officers especially in Sarawak in the aspects of their style of handling conflict.

3.1 Sample

The population will consist all the PTD officers in Sarawak. Currently, there are approximately 62 officers serving in Sarawak as the respondents.

In this research, questionnaires will be delivered through the PPTD’s Sarawak (Administrative and Diplomatic Service Association). It also will be delivered through the head of departments whereby PTD officers are in service. Stamped envelope will be enclosed to enable the delivering back of the questionnaire. Where needed, the researcher will collect the questionnaires himself.

As a civil servant, a few officers has been transferred to the Peninsular Malaysia or Sabah and some have not been replaced so far. Due to this, the researcher will try to keep in touch with those officers that have been transferred for the purpose of this research. Where