



UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

**CONFLICT MANAGEMENT STYLES AMONG PUBLIC SECTOR
MANAGERS IN MALAYSIA**

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**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
UNIVERSITY PUTRA MALAYSIA**

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By

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**Thesis Submitted to the Graduate School of Management,
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Chairman: Associate Professor Raduan Che Rose, PhD

Faculty: Graduate School of Management

This study examined the competence-based approach to conflict management from the Malaysian perspective especially on the effectiveness and appropriateness of the conflict management styles as perceived by dyads of superiors-subordinates. In the process, this study set out to determine the conflict management styles used by Administrative and Diplomatic Services (ADS) officers in handling interpersonal conflicts with their subordinates. In addition, it looked at the moderating effects of individual attribute, professional profile and management styles on the effectiveness and appropriateness of the conflict management styles used as reported by the superiors and subordinates.

Self-administered questionnaires were used to gather data. The sample consisted of 383 dyads of superiors-subordinates selected randomly from the 28 Ministries/Department. The quantitative data were analysed using various statistical and exploratory data analysis methods, descriptive tests, ANOVAs, Chi-square test of independence, and MANOVA.

The findings indicated that ADS officers used integrating, compromising and dominating styles to handle interpersonal conflicts with their subordinates. The least used style was the obliging style. The 9,9 management style was the most frequently used style followed by 1,9 management style. The least used style was the 1,1 management style. Both the superiors and subordinates rated the integrating style as the most effective, most relationally appropriate and most situationally appropriate style. The obliging style was rated as the least effective and least situationally appropriate style by both the superiors and subordinates while the dominating style was reported as the least relationally appropriate. The findings revealed that the subordinates were relatively satisfied with the level of supervision. However, there were no significant findings on the moderating effects of individual attribute, professional profile and management styles on the effectiveness and appropriateness of the conflict management styles used as reported by superiors and subordinates.

Further research was recommended, in particular on the competence-based approach to conflict management involving a social setting within an Eastern environment.

Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia
sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Doktor Falsafah.

**GAYA PENGURUSAN KONFLIK DIKALANGAN
PENGURUS SEKTOR AWAM DI MALAYSIA**

Oleh

WAITCHALLA RRV SUPPIAH

Februari 2007

Pengerusi: Prof. Madya Raduan Che Rose, PhD

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Kajian ini bertujuan untuk melihat pengurusan konflik dengan menggunakan pendekatan berdasarkan kompetensi dari perspektif Malaysia. Model ini melihat kepada keberkesanan dan kesesuaian gaya menguruskan konflik antara pengurus dan kakitangan bawahan. Dalam proses berkenaan, kajian ini bertujuan untuk mengenalpasti gaya pengurusan konflik yang digunakan oleh pegawai-pegawai Perkhidmatan Tadbir dan Diplomatik (PTD) untuk mengendalikan konflik dengan kakitangan bawahan mereka. Tambahan pula, ia mengkaji kesan moderatur sifat individu, profil profesional dan gaya pengurusan ke atas keberkesanan dan kesesuaian gaya pengurusan konflik sebagaimana yang dilaporkan oleh penyelia and kakitangan bawahannya.

Soal selidik yang diisi sendiri telah digunakan untuk mendapat data. Sampel terdiri daripada 383 pasangan penyelia dan kakitangan bawahan yang telah dipilih secara rawak dari 28 Kementerian/Jabatan. Data kuantitatif yang

dikumpul telah dianalisa dengan pelbagai analisa statistik seperti analisa penjelajahan data, ujian diskriptif, ujian *Chi-square* and *MANOVA*.

Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahawa pegawai-pegawai PTD menggunakan gaya integrasi, kompromi dan dominasi untuk mengendalikan konflik dengan kakitangan bawahan mereka. Gaya obligasi adalah gaya yang paling kurang digunakan. Gaya pengurusan 9,9 adalah gaya yang paling banyak digunakan diikuti oleh gaya pengurusan 1,9. Gaya pengurusan 1,1 adalah yang paling kurang digunakan. Kedua-dua penyelia and kakitangan bawahan menganggap integrasi sebagai gaya pengurusan konflik yang paling efektif, paling tinggi kesesuaian perhubungan dan kesesuaian keadaan. Gaya obligasi adalah gaya paling kurang efektif dan paling kurang kesesuaian keadaan sebagaimana yang dilaporkan oleh kedua-dua penyelia dan kakitangan bawahan manakala gaya dominasi dilaporkan sebagai paling kurang kesesuaian perhubungan. Kakitangan bawahan agak puas hati dengan penyeliaan. Tiada kesan signifikan yang didapati dalam kesan moderator sifat individu mahupun profil profesional dan gaya pengurusan atas keberkesanan dan kesesuaian gaya pengurusan konflik pengurusan sebagaimana yang dilaporkan oleh penyelia and kakitangan bawahan.

Cadangan-cadangan telah dikemukakan untuk menjalankan penyelidikan di masa depan khususnya dengan menggunakan pendekatan kompetensi konflik dalam aspek sosial dalam persekitaran timor.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT	ii
ABSTRAK	iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	vi
APPROVAL	viii
DECLARATION	x
TABLE OF CONTENTS	xi
LIST OF TABLES	xiv
LIST OF FIGURES	xvi
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS	xvii

CHAPTER

1	INTRODUCTION	1
	1.1 Background	1
	1.2 The Malaysian Context	3
	1.3 Problem Statement	6
	1.4 Objectives of the Study	11
	1.5 Significance of the Study	12
	1.6 Definition of Terms	18
	1.7 Organization of the Thesis	20
	1.8 Summary	21
2	LITERATURE REVIEW	22
	2.1 Introduction	22
	2.2 Organizational Conflict	22
	2.3 Definitions of Conflict	23
	2.4 Difference between Conflict Management and Conflict Resolution	25
	2.5 Views on Conflict: Good or Bad?	26
	2.6 Causes of Conflict	30
	2.7 Types of Conflict	32
	2.8 Conflict Management Typologies	34
	2.9 The Five Conflict Management Styles	38
	2.10 Previous Studies on Superior-Subordinate Conflict Management	43
	2.11 Contingency View on Conflict Management	49
	2.12 Face Negotiation Theory	53
	2.13 Conflict and Communication	56
	2.14 A Competence-Based Approach to Conflict	58



2.15	Previous Studies on Conflict and Competence (Effectiveness and Appropriateness)	62
2.16	Attribution Theory	71
2.17	Job Satisfaction	73
2.18	Definition of Job Satisfaction	75
2.19	Theories on Job Satisfaction	76
2.20	Previous Studies on Conflict Management and Satisfaction With Supervision	79
2.21	Personal Attribute and Conflict Management	83
2.22	Professional Profile and Conflict Management	85
2.23	Management Styles	88
2.24	Previous Studies on Management Styles	96
2.25	Mismanagement Styles	99
2.26	Summary	101
3	THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT	103
3.1	Introduction	103
3.2	The Theoretical Framework	103
3.3	Hypotheses Development	105
3.4	Summary	114
4	METHODOLOGY	115
4.1	Introduction	115
4.2	Quantitative versus Qualitative	115
4.3	Research Design	116
4.4	Population of Study	119
4.5	Unit of Analysis	121
4.6	Sample Size	122
4.7	Sampling Procedures	124
4.8	Research Instruments	127
4.9	Pretesting of Instrument	144
4.10	Data Collection Procedures	146
4.11	Questionnaire Response Rate	151
4.12	Preparing the Data for Analysis	152
4.13	Summary	164
5	FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION	165
5.1	Introduction	165
5.2	Profile of the Respondents	165
5.3	Management Styles Used by ADS Officers	174
5.4	Conflict Management Styles Used by ADS Officers	179

5.5	Comparing the Level of Perceived Effectiveness and Appropriateness of the Conflict Management Styles Based on Self-Report and Partner's Report	183
5.6	Ranking of Effectiveness, Relational Appropriateness and Situational Appropriateness of the Conflict Management Styles Based on Self-Report and Partner's Report	192
5.7	The Interaction between Individual Attribute, Professional Profile and Management Styles with Conflict Management Styles on the Effectiveness, Relational Appropriateness and Situational Appropriateness of the Conflict Management Styles Used.	219
5.8	The Subordinates Level of Satisfaction with Supervision.	230
5.9	The Relationship between Conflict Management Styles and the Subordinate's Level of Satisfaction with Supervision	231
5.10	Summary	234
6	CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS	238
6.1	Introduction	238
6.2	Summary of Findings	239
6.3	Implications	255
6.4	Limitations of the Study	262
6.5	Recommendations for Future Research	263
6.6	Summary	265
	REFERENCES	267
	LIST OF APPENDICES	A1
	APPENDICES	A2- A22

LIST OF TABLES

<u>Table</u>	<u>Title</u>	<u>Page</u>
2.1	Summary Of Various Styles Of Handling Conflicts Suggested By Researchers	A2
2.2	Styles Of Handling Interpersonal Conflict And The Situations Where They Are Appropriate Or Inappropriate	51
4.1	The Research Randomizer Form	127
4.2	Sources Consulted For The Measurements Used In Study	128
4.3	Cronbach Alpha Reliability Scores Of ROCI-II In Previous Studies	133
4.4	Skewness, Kurtosis And Kolmogorov-Smirnov Statistics For Supervisor	156
4.5	Skewness, Kurtosis And Kolmogorov-Smirnov Statistics For Subordinate	157
4.6	Root Mean Square Error Of Approximation (RMSEA) And Goodness-Of-Fit Index (GFI)	160
4.7	Summary Of Items Removed	161
4.8	Cronbach Alpha Reliability Test Results For Measurements Used	162
4.9	Summary Of Statistical Analysis	163
5.1	Distribution Of Respondents By Sex And Age Group	166
5.2	Distribution Of Respondents By – Duration Of Service In ADS/Government, Tenure In Present Ministry/ Department, Grade, Previous Working Experience And Type Of Service	170
5.3	Distribution Of Respondents By Number Of Postings Between Ministry/Department	174
5.4	Descriptive Statistics For Management Styles By Superiors	175
5.5	Leverne's Test Of Equality Of Error Variances – Superior	193
5.6	Leverne's Test Of Equality Of Error Variances – Subordinate	194



5.7	Multivariate Tests - Superior	194
5.8	Tests Of Between- Subjects Effects - Superior	196
5.9	Multiple Comparisons - Superior	199
5.10	Multivariate Tests - Subordinate	204
5.11	Tests Of Between- Subjects Effects - Subordinate	205
5.12	Multiple Comparisons - Subordinate	208
5.13	Ranking Of The Effectiveness, Relational Appropriateness And Situational Appropriateness Of The Conflict Management Styles By Superiors And Subordinates	214
5.14	Distribution Of Level Of Satisfaction With Supervision By Subordinates	231
5.15	Chi-Square Test Of Independence For Level Of Satisfaction With Supervision	232
5.16	Summary Of Findings	236

LIST OF FIGURES

<u>Figure</u>	<u>Title</u>	<u>Page</u>
2.1	Circle Of Conflicts	32
2.2	Five Conflict-Handling Orientations Plotted According To Party's Desire To Satisfy Own And Other's Concerns	36
2.3	The Styles Of Handling Interpersonal Conflict	37
2.4	Overlay Of Competence Dimensions Onto Conflict And Management Dimensions	61
2.5	The Managerial Grid	91
3.1	The Theoretical Framework Of The Study	105
5.1	Management Styles Used By Superiors	176
5.2	Conflict Management Styles Used By Superiors	180
5.3	Mean Effectiveness Of Integrating Style, Compromising Style And Avoiding Style.	185
5.4	Mean Relational Appropriateness Of Avoiding Style And Obliging Style	186
5.5	Mean Situational Appropriateness Of The Five Conflict Management Styles	187
5.6	Mean Effectiveness Of Obliging Style And Dominating Style	188
5.7	Mean Relational Appropriateness Of Integrating Style, Compromising Style And Dominating Style	189

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ADS	Administrative and Diplomatic Service
CAE	Conversational Appropriateness and Effectiveness
CFA	Confirmatory Factor Analysis
EDA	Exploratory Data Analysis
GFI Index	Goodness-of-Fit Index
JDI	Job Descriptive Index
PSD	Public Services Department
RMSEA	Root Mean Square Error of Approximation
ROCI-II	Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory-II
SMI	Styles of Management Inventory
SPSS	Statistical Package for Social Sciences

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background

Conflict is a pervasive aspect in both professional and social situations. It is put aptly by Landau, Landau and Landau (2001, p. 3) when they say "Conflict exists in all human relationships: it always has and probably always will". It occurs among family members, friends, colleagues and even between superiors and subordinates. As long as there is a human element present, conflict is certain. Boohar (2001, p.22) stresses that individuals who never experience conflict at the workplace are "living in a dream world, blind to their surroundings or are confined to solitary confinement".

When the inevitable conflict surfaces, individuals need to have the skill and knowledge on how to manage the conflict as competently as possible. This is because the way a conflict is handled would affect the nature of the conflict, that is, whether it becomes beneficial or destructive (Cetin & Hacifazlioglu, 2004). Conflict which is managed effectively and appropriately would add substantial value to an organization as it is considered as a healthy ingredient in business life (Robbins, 1973). It can also act a catalyst for change agent as suggested by Litterer (1966), Robbins (1978), Kaye (1994) and Lacey (2000).

On the other hand, a poorly managed conflict would drain an organization not only in terms of manpower but also money. Dana (2001) reported that exit interviews found that about 50% of departing employees quoted chronic unresolved conflict as the decisive factor for voluntary departures from company. This certainly brings a loss to the company's investment in terms of skills and job competencies. In addition, Kaye (1994), Dana (2001), Adkins (2003), Bacal (2004) and Wilson (2004) stressed that time is wasted when it is spent on conflicts. This situation is further aggravated when work time is used by employees to brood about problems and talking to other workers in order to gain more support on their side.

Other negative issues associated with conflicts are low employee motivation (Dana, 2001; Smith, 2002; Hessel, 2003; Adkins, 2003), lower productivity (Kaye, 1994; Smith, 2002; Adkins, 2003), equipment being stolen or vandalized (Kaye, 1994; Dana, 2001), increased legal costs (Kaye, 1994; Smith, 2002), and negative consequences for health (Smith, 2002; De Dreu, Dierendonck & Dijkstra, 2004). Tamam, Hassan and Yaid (1997) reported that poorly managed conflicts could produce relational strain in the work place. Furthermore, this could result in bad decisions as angry colleagues might withhold or manipulate information required by decision makers (Dana, 2001). Decision makers' judgments are also marred when they feel threatened by the other's intentions. As such, decisions made by people in conflict may not be the best. Furthermore, this could also result in a poisoned environment where people are afraid to raise important issues because they might be contentious (Landau et al., 2001).

Before individuals are able to manage conflict competently, they need to know the sources of these conflicts. Kezsbom (1992) believes that it would be to their advantage, if managers were aware of the various sources of conflict which exists in their organizations. With this awareness, individuals in organizations can be more capable of handling conflicts competently and thus overcome the potentially negative effects of conflict. Bacal (2004) asserts that to manage conflict effectively would entail all involved parties to understand the nature of conflict in the workplace. Understanding and having an appreciation of conflict would certainly benefit all parties involved.

1.2. The Malaysian Context

The Malaysian workforce is a very diverse workforce predominantly of three different ethnic origins, namely, the Malays, Chinese and Indians. These ethnic groups have been able to retain their own identity and live in harmony with others. Abdullah (1996) and Poon (1998) posited that though these ethnic groups share some common beliefs and values which are deep-seated such as deference to authority, concern for face saving, and harmonious relationships, they have distinct cultural and religious heritages.

Gill (1992) in describing the Malaysian workforce, reported that Malaysians had a tendency to use the 'give and take approach'. As such, when dealing with conflicts, more often than not, they either compromised or avoided conflicts. She

posited that compromising was considered as a 'win-win' approach as it was intended to avoid embarrassment.

Kabanoff (1989) reported that individuals using compromising styles were influenced by their positive evaluation of cooperation. Deutsch (1973), Leung (1988) and Kabanoff (1989) shared a common view that those who used such cooperative styles placed importance on relationship-maintenance aspects for future dealings. Kabanoff's (1989) study 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, Gill (1992), Abdullah (1992a), Mansor (1998) and Kennedy (2002) stressed the importance of hierarchy in a Malaysian environment. Seniority in position and age was a crucial factor to consider when dealing with conflict. This was because "authority was closely associated with seniority was still very much in a Malaysian's mind and subordinates tended to accept second place when dealing with someone senior" (Mansor, 1998, p.162). In addition, Abdullah and Gallagher (1995) reported that the focus on hierarchical differences due to status, rank and titles actually created communication barriers and also did not bring about adult-to-adult communication between superiors and subordinates. This led to junior members following an "unquestionable obedience and symbolic conformity based on the adage that *the boss is right and if he is wrong he is still the boss*" (Abdullah & Gallagher, 1995, p. 12). Any attempts by juniors to suggest improvements or changes might not be positively viewed by the

seniors as this was deemed to threaten the existing “status quo”. As Schermerhorn (1994) reported from an interview with Asma Abdullah (a corporate trainer and specialist in intercultural management, training and education) “Malaysians have been ‘programmed’ not to fight or question their bosses” (p. 50).

As such, subordinates do not challenge their superiors or even clarify judgments because of their deference to their superiors. This was an indication of respect for seniors and face-saving. This is further strengthened by Mansor’s (1998) opinion that deference to authority held together the fabric of social order. This deference was also applicable when dealing with titled individuals with emphasis on the correct use of titles, protocol and rank. Furthermore, Abdullah and Gallagher (1995) added that as a result of this respect and deference for seniors and elders, subordinates generally were unwilling to make the first move to bring about improvement and change.

Gill (1992), Abdullah (1992a) and Kennedy (2002) also argued of the low importance placed on assertiveness in a Malaysian setting, as the culture discouraged individual displays of assertiveness or confrontational behavior. Abdullah (2001) reported 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 (Schermerhorn, 1994).

Past researchers (Abdullah, 1992a, 1994; Mansor, 1998; Mansor & Ali, 1998) posited that the issue of 'saving face' was an important element to consider, when working in a Malaysian environment. Abdullah (1992a, p. 13) put it aptly when she said "As relationships are personalised, face is important and needs to be preserved because of the overriding aim of maintaining social harmony and cordial relationships. Face means maintaining a person's dignity by not embarrassing or humiliating him in front of others. As the individual is part of a family or group, embarrassing him would also embarrass his family and community". In order to save face, subordinates did not confront their bosses, even if they were not happy with them. This however, more often than not, led to subordinates being uncooperative. De Dreu (1997) cited a desire to maintain face as one of the reasons for individuals to avoid conflict. As such, the issue of face is an important element to consider when looking at conflicts in a Malaysian environment.

1.3. Problem Statement

Discussions were conducted with both the Administrative and Diplomatic Service (ADS) officers and their subordinates with regards to the conflicts in the workplace. These discussions were centered on the types and causes of conflicts, as well as how these conflicts were handled by the superiors.