

# An Examination between the Relationships of Conflict Management Styles and Employees' Satisfaction

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## Abstract

This study examined the relationships between conflict handling styles and subordinates' satisfaction with supervision. Data from 139 respondents from major industries in Malaysia including service, manufacturing, mining and construction demonstrated that subordinates were more satisfied with their superiors' supervision through their exercise of integrating, compromising, and obliging styles. On the other hand, subordinates who perceived their superiors as primarily utilizing dominating and avoiding style viewed them as incompetent in supervision and thus lowering their level of job satisfaction.

**Keywords:** Conflict Handling Styles, Satisfaction with supervision

## 1. Introduction

Conflict is known to be inseparable in all human interactions. In any organization, role differentiation acquires different use of conflict handling styles. Work direction, reward, supervision, discipline and performance review also involve the use of conflict handling styles. Organizational change and control may be viewed from a conflict perspective. In attempts to explain the nature or dynamics of a particular organizational phenomenon, conflict may be incorporated as a causal factor.

A great question confronting our industrial society is concerned with the issue on how can the skills of managers be enriched so as to make it possible for them to act with greater proficiency when their contributions are from dealing with and through people especially their subordinates? One way of looking into this issue is from the conflict perspectives. The attention to interpersonal relationships is due to our belief that sound superior-subordinate relationships are important and consistent with humanistic and cooperative work environment sought by contemporary managers. It is also believed that positive interpersonal relationship at workplace is able to increase subordinates' satisfaction with supervision and subordinates with high levels of satisfaction are more likely to be committed to the organization (Brown and Peterson, 1993).

Differences in the perception of conflict possess implication in its own right. This is due to superior's uses of conflict styles may be reinforced by subordinates' responses or the superior may anticipate subordinates' reaction to the use of conflict styles. It is worthwhile for the superior to be aware of the existence of multiple sources of conflict in work situations and how it promote subordinates' job satisfaction since dissatisfaction itself could lead to many organizational dysfunctions such as decline in work performances, dissatisfaction, absenteeism, high turnover, and job stress (Churchill, Ford and Walker, 1976; Fisher and Gittelson, 1983; Van Sell, Brief and Schuler, 1981; Rahim and Buntzman, 1989).

### 1.1 Purpose and Significance of the Study

This research analyzes in general the distribution of conflict handling styles, and its consequences in terms of subordinates' satisfaction with superior supervision in Malaysian companies. There have been few studies done to investigate the consequences of superior styles of handling conflict in the Malaysian settings. Achieving greater understanding of the styles of handling conflict and adopting the appropriate one will enable the superior to better achieve their objective in maintaining organizational harmony and good unity. This research is inevitably conducted in Malaysian cultural setting with its diverse social and organizational culture. It will be interesting to look at how Malaysian workforce responds to different conflict handling styles as social behavior is normally implanted and entrenched in the given society. Another reason of this study is to extend the validity of previous research findings regarding the relationships between supervisory conflict handling styles and satisfaction with supervision in a Malaysian work environment. This will provide an opportunity for comparing the consequences of conflict handling style in this region with those reported as occurring in the West.

### 1.2 Research Questions

The delineation of research question is to find out the various methods of conflict handling styles employed by superior in the Malaysian companies, what are the consequences of conflict handling styles and how it affects subordinates' job satisfaction. Hence, this study seeks to answer the followings research questions.

- Are there any significant differences in subordinates' satisfaction with supervision when subjected to different conflict management styles?

### *1.3 Scope of the Study*

The foundation of this study rests upon the interaction among major variables as depicted in Figure 1 (Note 1). The primary data used in this study is secured through survey questionnaire. Cross-sectional data of respondents from Malaysian three industries namely, service, manufacturing, and mining and construction is subjected to quantitative analysis to test the conflict handling styles model.

## **2. Literature Review**

This section reviews the relevant constructs and variables as well as their interactions involving: (1) Concept of conflict; (2) Typologies of conflict handling styles; and (3) Satisfaction with supervision.

### *2.1 The Concept of Conflict*

Conflict is generally defined as a disagreement with regard to interests or ideas. It is a process in which one party perceives that its interests are being opposed or negatively affected by another party (Wall and Callister, 1995). Rahim, (1992) and Antonioni, (1999) identified conflict as an interactive process manifested in incompatibility, disagreement or dissonance within or between social entities. Conflict can occur between individual, groups, organizations, and even nations (Rahim and Bonoma, 1979; Rahim, 1983, 1986). As human being interacts in organizations, differing values and situations create tension. Conflict is thereby viewed as a situation in which two or more individuals operating within a unit appear to be incompatible.

Organizations are becoming increasingly dependent on groups as the central unit of work. While groups have the advantage of pooling their collective resources, their interdependent nature inevitability creates conflict (Green, Leslie and Marks, 2001). Conflict has historically been viewed as undesirable, something to be avoided (Esquivel 1997). Classical organization theorists believed that conflict produced inefficiency and was therefore undesirable, detrimental to the organization and should be eliminated or at least minimized to the extent possible. Views toward conflict changed with the emerged of social systems and open system theory. Several researchers such as Janis (1972), Wilson and Jerrell (1981), Rahim (1986), Cosier and Dalton (1990), Kolb and Putnam (1992), Hellriegel, Slocum and Woodman (1995), Van de Vliert (1997), and Cetin and Hacifazlioglu, (2004) supported the social and open system theory that conflict should be regarded as a positive indicator of effective organization management.

Thomas and Schmidt (1976) has reported that managers rated conflict management to be somewhat same level or greater importance than planning, communication, motivation or decision making. In support of this view, Lippitt (1982) suggested organization should treat conflict management as an important management-development activity.

Various models of conflict management have been developed throughout the years. Rahim and Bonoma (1979) differentiated the styles of handling interpersonal conflict along two basic dimensions: concern for self and concern for others. These dimensions explain the degree (high or low) to which a person wants to satisfy the concern for others. Studies by Ruble and Thomas (1976) and Van De Vliert and Kabanoff (1990) support these dimensions.

Applying good management principles in building quality relationships with people will help to prevent or at least lessen conflict. In spite of the best efforts at prevention, conflict does arise. The secret is to learn to cope positively with conflict, and not to see it as an enemy to peace, but an opportunity for growth in relationships (Laue, 1981, and Blome, 1983). In the past, management theorist used the term "conflict avoidance", but today this phrase is increasingly replaced with the phrase of "conflict management". Conflict management recognizes that while conflict does have associated costs, it can also bring with it great benefits. It is for this reasons that today's managers seek not to avoid, but to manage conflict within the organization (Nurmi and Darling, 1997; Su-Mei Lin, 2003).

### *2.2 Typologies of Conflict Handling Styles*

There are various styles of behavior by which interpersonal conflict can be handled. In order to manage conflict effectively, one style may be more suitable than the other depending upon the situation. Follett (1940) conceptualized five methods of handling conflict in organizations i.e. domination, compromise, integration, avoidance and suppression. Conflict management style has been continuously measured by a variety of different taxonomies. Researchers in social psychology and organizational behavior have proposed models that reduce the myriad tactics of conflict handling styles. One of the first conceptual schemes for categorizing conflict revolved around a simple cooperation-competition dichotomy followed the intuitive notion that styles can be arrayed on a single dimension ranging from competition or selfishness (Deutsch, 1949, 1973). However, doubts were raised over the ability of the dichotomy to reflect the complexity of an individual's perceptions of conflict behavior. In other words, the limitation of single-dimension model is that it fails to encompass styles that involve high concern

for both self and other, and styles that involve neither high concern for neither self nor other (Ruble and Thomas, 1976; Smith, 1987, Thomas and Kilmann, 1974; Pruitt and Rubin, 1986).

Subsequent theorists then drawn on a new two-dimensional grid for classifying the styles as suggested by Blake and Mouton (1964, 1970) which is a self-oriented and other-oriented concern. Other authors have labeled the two dimensions differently (e.g., Thomas and Kilmann, 1974; Rahim, 1983a, 1986; Thomas, 1976; Pruitt and Rubin, 1986; Van de Vliert and Hordijk, 1989, but the basic assumptions have remained similar. Although it has also been debated that individuals select among three or four conflict styles (Pruitt, 1983; Putnam and Wilson, 1982), but evidence from confirmatory factor analyzes concluded that the five factor model has a better fit with data than models of two, three and four styles orientations (Rahim and Magner, 1994, 1995). While the conflict styles somewhat differ in terms of name, the general principles and basic descriptions of the styles appear very similar (Kozan, 1997). Each instrument has been utilized in numerous research studies, yet an examination of the results indicates many inconsistencies and contradictory outcomes. Such unequivocal invite a methodical, statistical analysis of all data in an attempt to determine a more valid overall picture.

For the purpose of this study, the researcher has chosen Rahim and Bonoma (1979), and Rahim (1983, 1985, 1986a, 2001) styles of handling interpersonal conflict on two basic dimensions: concern for self and concern for others. It is among the most popular styles of handling conflict used in research. In fact, Rahim and Bonoma's (1979) model was based on Blake and Mouton's (1964) grid of managerial styles as well as the Thomas-Kilmann MODE instrument (1974). Specifically, Rahim and Bonoma confirmed and refined the factor structure of the managerial grid through contact over 1,200 corporate managers across the United States (Rahim, 1983). This work leads them to identify five specific conflict styles as shown in Figure 2 (Note 2). Rahim (1983, 1986a, 2001) defines styles of handling conflict as integrating, obliging, dominating, avoiding and compromising. It was Rahim's (1986a) idea that "organizational participants must learn the five styles of handling conflict to deal with different conflict situations effective" (p.30). The five conflict styles that emerge from various combinations of these two dimensions are described below:

#### 2.2.1 Integrating Style

High concern for self and others reflects openness, exchange of information, and examination of differences to reach an effective solution acceptable to both parties. The integrating style concentrates on problem solving in a collaborative manner. Individuals with this style face conflict directly and try to find new and creative solutions to problems by focusing on their own needs as well as the needs of others. Lawrence and Lorsch (1967) found the problem-solving (integrating) style to be more effective than other styles for attaining integration of the activities of different subsystems. When the issues are complex, this style is suitable in utilizing the skills and information possessed by different parties to formulate solutions and successful implementations. Thus, the integrating style is believe to be both effective and appropriate in managing conflicts and, therefore, is perceived as highly competent. The integrating style is competent because it provides each disputant with access to the other person's perceptions or incompatible goals, thereby enabling them to find solution that integrates the goals and needs of both parties (Tutzauer and Roloff, 1988).

#### 2.2.2 Obliging Style

Low concern for self and high concern for others style is associated with attempting to play down the differences and emphasizing commonalities to satisfy the concern of the other party. Obliging is associated with accommodating behaviors that include putting aside one's own needs to please the partner, passively accepting the decisions the partner makes, making yielding or conceding statements, denying or failing to express one's needs, and explicitly expressing harmony and cooperation in a conflict episode (Hocker and Wilmot, 1998). These types of conflict strategies are indirect and cooperative (Blake and Mouton, 1964). It can be used as a strategy when a party is willing to give up something with the hope of getting something in exchange from the other party when needed.

#### 2.2.3 Dominating Style

High concern for self and low concern for others style has been identified with win-loses orientation or with forcing behavior to win one's position. The dominating style relies on the use of position power, aggression, verbal dominance, and perseverance. This style is direct and uncooperative (Blake and Mouton, 1964). Within interpersonal context, the dominating (competing/distributive) style has been found to be associated with low levels of effectiveness and appropriateness. However, Papa and Canary (1995) suggested that the dominating style might be somewhat effective in organizational contexts when there are production-related goals. In this case, an individual might use power strategies and aggression to effectively accomplish a goal, even though these strategies may be seen as inappropriate at a relational level. Spitzberg, Canary and Cupach, (1994) term dominating style as the maximizing response to conflict, because it maximizes the importance of one's own needs at the expense of the

other individual's needs. Therefore, the dominating style may be seen as effective but not appropriate.

#### 2.2.4 Avoiding Style

Low concern for self and others style has been associated with withdrawal, buck-passing, or sidestepping situations. An avoiding person fails to satisfy his or her own concern as well as the concern of the other party. This style is useful when the issues are trivial or when the potential dysfunctional effect of confronting the other party outweighs the benefits of the resolution of conflict.

#### 2.2.5 Compromising Style

Intermediate in concern for self and others style involves give-and-take whereby both parties give up something to make a mutually acceptable decision. It may mean splitting the difference, exchanging concessions, or seeking middle-ground position. It may be appropriate when the goals of the conflicting parties are mutually exclusive or when both parties, who are equally powerful, e.g. Labor and management, have reached a deadlock in their negotiation. This style may be of some use in dealing with strategic issues, but heavy reliance on this style may be dysfunctional.

### 2.3 Satisfaction with Supervision

Satisfaction with supervision has received extensive attention in organizational research. In this study, satisfaction is defined as, "a pleasurable or positive emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one's job" (Locke, 1976: 1,300). Work satisfaction is an important workplace construct and one that is of concern for effective management. Thus, numerous research findings suggest that conflict management style is related to various aspects of employee satisfaction are of interest and represent an important extension to the job satisfaction literature. These findings imply that satisfaction with supervision is one of the most important attitudinal issues in the workplace that managers face. Thus, the relevance of satisfaction with supervision in an organizational study needs no further explanation. It is a collection of feelings or affective responses of the organizational members which are associated with the job situation within the organization. Smith, Kendall, and Hulin (1969), in their well documented measure, the Cornell JDI (Cornell Job Descriptive Index) described five areas of satisfaction: the work itself, the supervision, the co-workers, the pay, and the opportunities for promotion on the job. Since the theme of the present study is on the superior-subordinate relationships, the job-facet satisfaction that is most relevant to our study is the satisfaction with supervision.

Furthermore, individual subordinate with higher levels of satisfaction with supervision demonstrates decreased propensity to look for other job (Sager, 1994) and decrease propensity to leave (Boles, 1997). Turnover is a major issue for many organizations (Simmons and Ruth, 1997). It is a problem of considerable importance because of the costs associated with hiring and training new personnel, as well as the costs associated with not having that individual contributing his/her work efforts toward organizational goals.

The conflict handling styles which superior uses in an organization in supervising their subordinates can have a broad impact on the subordinates' attitude towards work, and the kind of relationships they have with the superiors. The amount of supervision and direction given to the subordinates will increase their satisfaction with supervision. Conversely, many studies recorded that supervision to the extent that the superior exercises dominating and avoiding is found to have a negative impact on the subordinates' satisfaction (Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoeck, and Rosenthal, 1964; Likert, 1967).

The other aspect of supervising style is the quality and frequency of communication between the superiors and their subordinates. This includes the superior's ability to communicate effectively his/her demands and expectations, company's policies and procedures especially those concerning evaluation and compensation, informing of the subordinate's performance as well as verbal and non-verbal rewards. Clearly, from human relations perspectives, supervisory satisfaction is related to the personality traits of the superior such as his/her temperament, openness, industriousness, pleasantness etc. The positive side of all of these traits can enhance satisfaction. Related to the personal resourcefulness, supervisory satisfaction is also dependent on the superior's distinguishing qualities and abilities such as intelligence and knowledge.

### 3. Hypotheses to be tested

The hypothesis is those dealing with consequences of conflict handling styles upon subordinates' satisfaction with supervision (H1a & H1b). More specifically, the following hypotheses were formulated which serve as focal points for the study.

Organizational conflict researchers (e.g. Rahim and Buntzman, 1989; Burke, 1970; Lawrence and Lorsch, 1967; Likert and Likert, 1976) generally assert that superior who exhibits integrating, compromising, and obliging styles are more prone to foster a cordial dyadic relationships among superiors and subordinates. These styles are related to an effective conflict management. Several studies on the integrating, compromising, and obliging styles of

handling conflict show consistent results in satisfaction with supervision (Korabik, Baril, and Watson, 1993; Tutzauer and Roloff, 1988; Wall and Galanes, 1986; Vigil-King, 2000). Likewise, other studies recorded that superior uses dominating and avoiding is linked to negative effect on subordinates' satisfaction (Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoeck, and Rosenthal, 1964; Likert, 1967). Thus, it can be hypothesized that:

*Hypothesis 1a:* Superior's integrating, obliging, and compromising styles have direct and positive effect on the subordinates' satisfaction with supervision.

*Hypothesis 1b:* Superior's dominating, and avoiding styles have negative effect on the subordinates' satisfaction with supervision.

#### **4. Research Methodology**

##### *4.1 Sampling Design*

The sample for this study comprises of the executives, managers and professionals in services, manufacturing, mining and construction companies. This sample was selected for two reasons: (1) this represents the group of more educated people who are more aware of the kind of conflict styles with superiors and normally hinge more on the non-traditional organizational-based kind of relationship to sustain their interest in the organization, and (2) the industries are among the more dominant industries in Malaysia that contribute significantly to the Gross Domestic Product and labor employment.

The companies that met the above criteria were selected from the list of companies gathered from the Federation of Manufacturers Malaysia (FMM), Construction Industry Development Board (CIDB), and Malaysian Trade and Commerce Directory. Stratified random sampling was used in selecting the samples from the large database. Data subjects were obtained through survey questionnaire.

##### *4.2 Research Instruments*

All data used in the study consist of responses to questionnaire items. Measures of the relevant constructs were taken from previous studies are discussed here.

###### *4.2.1 Conflict Handling Style*

Conflict management styles were measure by using the Form C of ROCI-II (Rahim, 1983a). This multi-item instrument contains 28 items uses a 5-point Likert scale to assess subordinates' perceptions on supervisor's style of handling conflict. The ROCI-II was designed to measure 5 dimensions or styles of resolving conflict. 7 items for measuring integrating style, 6 items each for measuring obligating style and avoiding styles, 4 items for measuring compromising style and 5 items for measuring dominating style.

###### *4.2.2. Satisfaction with Supervision*

The instrument used to measure satisfaction with supervision is the updated version of the original Job Descriptive Index (JDI; Smith at el., 1969) which was later revised by Roznowski (1989). The instrument is made up of 18 items.

##### *4.3 Data Analysis Techniques*

Reliability and factor analysis was used to check the consistency and dimensionality of the scale items. Multiple regression analysis is performed to check the criterion-related validity of the scale items. Pearson Intercorrelation was used to measure the relationships among conflict handling styles and subordinates' satisfaction with supervision. It allowed a straight forward interpretation of the hypothesized relationships.

#### **5. Research Results and Discussions**

##### *5.1 Sample Characteristics*

From the total of 145 responses received, data from 139 respondents were usable. By ethnic group, 42% of the respondents were Chinese, 38% were Malay, and 17% were Indian, while other races made up the rest. By gender, 53% were male and 47% were female. In terms of age, the highest proportion of respondents fell into the 23-30 years age group. They accounted for 63% of the total number of respondents. This was followed by the 31-40 years age group (33%), while those above 41 years old accounted for the remaining.

On the whole, the education level of the respondents was high. Nearly 84% of the respondents had education up to tertiary level. Only 1% of the respondents had no tertiary education. The high educational level was reflected in the position or the type of occupation held by the majority of the respondents i.e. 7 Directors/General Managers/ Assistant General Manager, 3 Senior Managers, 46 Departmental Manager/Assistant Managers and 83 Executives.

The average salary of the respondents was higher than the population's average. The survey data showed that 27% of the respondents earned more than RM5000 per month, 14% earned RM4001 to RM5000 per month, 49% earned RM3001 to RM4000 per month, and 10% earned RM2001 to RM3000 per month.

On average, the respondents had worked in the present company for 4 years with a standard deviation of 3.6 years. It was noted that 59% of the total respondents had worked for 1 to 3 years in the present company, 25% had worked between 4 to 6 years, 12% had worked between 7 to 9 years, and 4% had worked between 10 and 13 years, while only 1% of the respondents had worked longer than 20 years in the present company. The degree of job mobility among respondents was reflected in the average number of previous jobs held by respondents i.e. 2 jobs. For the present sample, 20% responded that they had no previous job, 29% had one, 32% had two, 11% had three and the rest reported that they had more than 4 previous jobs.

In terms of the organizational size, the survey had selected sample which represents the medium to large sized Malaysian companies. It was found that 39% of the companies had 1 to 100 employees, 7% had 101 to 200 employees, 9% had 201 to 400 employees, 17% had 401 to 1000 employees and 29% had more than 1000 employees. Classifying the business according to the type of industry revealed that a greater portion of the companies are in services industries (55%), followed by manufacturing industries (23%) and 6% of mining and construction.

The survey revealed the following information about the respondent's superior. A 76% superiors reported in the survey were males and 24% were female. A majority of them were holding medium to high management positions. Racial composition of the superiors was: 46% Chinese, 41% Malay, 8% Indian and 5% from other races. On average, the superiors had worked in the organization for 11 years with a standard deviation of 7.6 years - longer than the subordinates' average. Only 1% had worked for less than a year, 30% had worked between 1 and 5 years, 29% had worked between 6 and 10 years, 17% had worked between 11 to 15 years, 13% had worked between 16 to 20 years and 10% had worked more than 20 years in the present company. The superiors were holding various positions in the company with 33% of them in the first hierarchical level, 30% in the second level, and 26% in the third level, while only a fraction of them were in the lower management positions. Their educational level was also predictably high, with 55% of them having had tertiary education. Only 6% had up to either primary or secondary education. By designation, 64 of the superiors were the directors/general manager/ assistant general manager of companies, 23 were the senior managers, 50 were the departmental manager/assistant managers and the rest consisted of executives.

### 5.2 Validating the Scales

The standardized Cronbach Alpha and the inter-item correlation for each subscale are provided in Table 1 (Note 3). The internal consistency reliability coefficients for all the scales were satisfactory (Nunnally, 1978). All the scales had coefficient Cronbach Alpha greater than .78. The inter-item correlations for the five scales ranged between .14 and .82.

The data on the 28 conflict handling style items from the sample of 139 respondents were factor-analyzed. This was done to test the earlier postulation that the underlying set of data contained 5 distinct dimensions or factors (Steward, 1981). These initial factors were derived through the Maximum Likelihood analysis and the terminal solution was reached through Varimax Rotation and Kaiser Normalization using the SPSS computer package. The analysis extracted five factors. The selection of a factor and an item was guided by the criteria: Eigenvalue > 1.0 and Scree Plot and factor loading >0.4, respectively (Ford, MacCallum, and Tait, 1986). Based on these criteria, the first five factors were selected. The results are presented in Table 2 (Note 4). The order of items was altered to show the clustering of items more clearly. The factor loading of >0.4 are underlined to indicate the items finally selected to represent the five subscales.

Three of the factors extracted which represented integrating, dominating and avoiding conflict handling styles contained all items as earlier included in the scale. Factor which represented obliging style contained 4 items as against 6 items earlier included in the scale. Item "My superior generally tries to satisfy the needs of mine" was found to be poorly correlated with the rest of the obliging styles items. It also loaded more on the integrating style. This item is dropped from the scale. A closer examination of the responses to this item indicated that respondents tend to overstate their intention (mean score of 4.0) to have a good superior-subordinate relationship. The reason for this could be that most individuals especially the subordinates wished for harmony at work and would make an effort to maintain a good working relationship with their superiors despite difference between them. Item "My superior usually allows concessions to me" of obliging style item failed to meet the selection criteria and was thus dropped from the scale. Factor which represented compromising style contained 3 items as against 4 items earlier included in the scale. Item "My superior tries to find a middle course to resolve an impasse" was found to be poorly correlated with the rest of the compromising style items and not be suitable for inclusion here.

A multiple regression analysis was run to test the direct relationship between superior conflict handling styles and subordinates' satisfaction with supervision. The result indicates that significant relationship exists and together the independent variables explained about 43.7% of the variation on satisfaction with supervision. The relations

between the five styles and “theoretically-related” dependent variable further reinforce the criterion related validity of the conflict handling scale. The result of analysis is shown on Table 3 (Note 5). The results showed that only integrating style has direct positive effect on satisfaction with supervision (Beta = .42;  $p < .0001$ ). Also, it is noted that dominating style has direct but negative effect on satisfaction with supervision (Beta = -.32,  $p < .0001$ ).

### 5.3 Testing of Hypotheses

**Hypothesis H1a** states that superior’s integrating, compromising and obliging styles have direct and positive effect on the subordinates’ satisfaction with supervision. The correlational analysis in Table 4 (Note 6) provided good support for H1a. The integrating, compromising and obliging styles of handling conflict showed positive relationships and highly correlated with satisfaction with supervision. These three correlations were significant beyond .01 level.

In the relationship of conflict handling styles to satisfaction with supervision, integrating style ranked highest among other style exercises ( $r = .62$ ,  $p < .01$ ). This was followed by compromising style and obliging style which had coefficients of correlation of .33,  $p < .01$  and .29,  $p < .01$  respectively. The ranking of intercorrelation was somewhat similar to the study of Rahim and Buntzman (1989) conducted on respondents with post graduate working experience. It was expected that integrating, compromising and obliging style represents a high level of inner acceptance between superior and subordinate relationships. As Rahim and Buntzman (1989) found out, the integrating, compromising, and obliging style of handling conflict tends to foster a more satisfied, cooperative and prolonged relationships among superiors and subordinates.

Literature on organizational conflict also shows that integrating, compromising, and obliging styles are positively associated with supervision with satisfaction. Burke (1970) suggested that, in general, a confrontation (integrating), compromising, and obliging styles were related to the effective management of conflict that lead to supervisory satisfaction, while forcing (dominating) and withdrawing (avoiding) were related to the ineffective management of conflict that lead to supervisory dissatisfaction. Lawrence and Lorsch (1967) indicated that an integrating, compromising, and obliging styles dealing with inter-group conflict was used to a significantly greater degree in higher performing organizations than lower performing organizations.

A field study with a convenience collegiate sample by Rahim and Buntzman (1989) suggested that the integrating (problem solving), compromising and obliging styles of handling conflict is positively correlated with supervision with satisfaction. Likert and Likert (1976) strongly argued and provided some evidence to suggest that an organization that encourages participation and problem solving (integrating) behaviors attains a higher level of satisfaction with supervision. Several studies on the integrating, compromising, and obliging styles of handling conflict show consistent results. These styles result in high joint benefit for the parties, better decisions, and greater satisfaction with supervision (Korabik, Baril, and Watson, 1993; Tutzauer and Roloff, 1988; Wall and Galanes, 1986). Vigil-King (2000) study shows that superior that use more integrating conflict management styles are likely to have higher subordinates’ supervision with satisfaction than superior using less integrating styles.

Among subordinates, integrative style emerges as a very important cue for acceptance and recognition of the superior’s conflict management style as reflected in the present result. It most likely gains their compliance and least likely to provoke their resistance (Gross and Guerrero, 2000). Similarly, greater satisfaction with supervision among subordinates may lead to greater cooperation and heightened dependence. In the superior-subordinate interaction, subordinates frequently say what is acceptable rather than what they know is true. Therefore, an individual subordinate may use a more obliging style with superiors. This is due to subordinates are likely to withdraw from a conflict situation (Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoeck and Rosenthal, 1964).

As the present results supported the general view the integrating, compromising and obliging style has a positive effect on the superior- subordinate relationship. The high degree of intercorrelations among the integrating, compromising and obliging served to temper the previous discussions and tended to suggest that while integrating style emerged as the dominant explanatory of conflict handling style, its effective utilization might be tied to some extent, to the superior’s exercise of a combination of other style such as compromising and obliging style.

**Hypothesis H1b** predicts that superior’s dominating and avoiding styles have negative effect on subordinates’ satisfaction with supervision. Both the dominating and avoiding styles showed relatively negative but significant correlation ( $r = -.50$ ,  $p < .01$ ;  $r = -.24$ ,  $p < .01$  respectively) with supervisory satisfaction. In the dominating style, subordinates’ responses tend to be dependent on the normative acceptance of the position and prerogatives of the organization at large including its leadership. The present result concurred with the conclusion made by Rahim (1986) and Burke (1970) that dominating and avoiding styles are less effective means of supervisory satisfaction.

The present result seems to support Hypothesis H1b. The study indicated that the dominating style perceived held by a superior was negatively associated with supervisory satisfaction. Past researchers supported this correlation (e.g. Van de Vliert, Euwema, and Huismans, 1995; Van de Vliert, 1997; Rahim and Buntzman, 1989; Gross and

Guerrero, 2000) have stated that dominating style which is derived from control over negative or punishing outcomes for others does not appear to be a suitable style for dealing with subordinates. It is negatively related with concern for the other party which will usually not improve the relationship (Sorenson, Morse and Savage, 1999). The traditionalists believed that dominating is ineffective and can lead to conflict of social interaction. Although it has been found in some studies that individuals can achieve substantive outcomes through forcing behavior (De Dreu and Van de Vliert, 1997; Rahim, 1992; Thomas, 1992) but people could not be forced into a deep-seated acceptance of organizational requirements.

## 6. Conclusion

Overall, the results of this study were consistent with the hypotheses based upon other organizational studies involving qualified and professional people. The research instruments used in this study were tested and found to be reliable in our Malaysian work environment. The results provided some tentative, but hopefully useful guidance for organizational administration.

Inter correlations among the five styles of conflict handling showed that the results are closely similar to Rahim and Buntzman (1989). The results revealed that integrating, compromising and to some degree obliging are found to be in association with each other. These intercorrelations may give rise to a favorable halo effect with respect to the perceived influence, for example if a superior is perceived as having integrating style, this will also augment other styles (e.g. compromising, obliging) at his/her disposal. On the other hand, dominating was the least correlated with all other styles and most often stands alone. Among all the conflict styles, dominating was most related to avoiding style. It indicates that dominating and avoiding style tend to be used interchangeably. Though not considered as a serious disadvantage, notable intercorrelations among the five styles of handling conflict denote the difficulty of finding conflict style typology which is both exhaustive and conceptually distinct.

The conflict management styles were also found to be associated to an individual perception's of the source of conflict style. Superior who was perceived to exercise dominating style tends to exercise greater management control – giving little opportunity for the subordinate to be personally responsible for a meaningful portion of his/her works. In assessing the effectiveness of the various influence means, the results suggested that integrating, compromising and obliging should be emphasized to ensure subordinates' satisfaction with supervision. Dominating style should be minimized in any influence attempt except in situations that call for such approach, such as time of crisis or low performance. Comparative studies revealed an interesting difference in the rank ordering of superior styles of handling conflict. Recent study by Rahim and Buntzman (1989) ranked integrating, compromising and obliging as the most favorable, and dominating and avoiding as the lowest among conflict styles in eliciting subordinates' acceptance of supervision satisfaction. The results suggested a notion that the effectiveness of conflict handling style does relate to the situation and context of the job environment. Although the desirability of some conflict styles were obvious, it should be noted that they might not necessarily have same impact on all attitudinal and behavioral outcomes measures. For example, Rahim (1986), Bachman, Bowers and Marcus (1968) and Rahim and Buntzman (1989) discovered that integrating and compromising were more associated with organizational effectiveness, dominating style was the most important for complying with superior's request and integrating, compromising and obliging were most related to supervisory satisfaction.

The challenge of the contemporary organization is also to encourage the use of the integrating/problem solving style of handling conflict among superior and subordinates. Employees should also be trained not to engage in win-lose or bargaining style of handling conflict. This can be done by strengthening the integrating conflict-management style and discouraging the use of an avoiding style. To attain this goal, training in conflict management of subordinates and superiors and appropriate changes in organization design and culture would be needed (Rahim, 2001).

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### Notes

- Note 1. Model of Conflict Handling Style and Interactions
- Note 2. The Styles of Handling Interpersonal Conflict
- Note 3. Summary of Scale Items and Measure of Scale Reliabilities
- Note 4. Factor Structure Matrix for Varimax Rotated Factor Solution
- Note 5. Multiple Regression Analysis: Conflict Style and Satisfaction with Supervision
- Note 6. Pearson Correlations among Key Variables

Table 1. Summary of Scale Items and Measure of Scale Reliabilities

Scales	Inter-item Correlation	Cronbach Alpha
Conflict Handling Styles		
Integrating	.61 to .80	.95
Obliging	.51 to .74	.85
Compromising	.42 to .61	.78
Dominating	.53 to .82	.90
Avoiding	.14 to .55	.78
Satisfaction with Supervision	.29 to .64	.86

Table 2. Factor Structure Matrix for Varimax Rotated Factor Solution

Item No	Conflict Styles/Items	IN I	OB II	CO III	DO IV	AV V
<b>I. Integrating Style (IN)</b>						
1.	My superior tries to investigate an issue with me to find a solution acceptable to us.	<u>.72</u>	.26	.16	-.18	-.18
4.	My superior tries to integrate his/her ideas with those of mine to come up with a decision jointly.	<u>.78</u>	.20	.17	-.20	-.07
5.	My superior tries to work with me to find solutions to a problem which satisfy our expectations.	<u>.84</u>	.20	.18	-.13	-.14
12.	My superior exchanges accurate information with me to solve a problem together.	<u>.72</u>	.19	.25	-.27	-.13
22.	My superior tries to bring all our concerns out in the open so that the issues can be resolved in the best possible way.	<u>.74</u>	.15	.28	-.19	-.10
23.	My superior collaborates with me to come up with decisions acceptable to us.	<u>.76</u>	.19	.20	-.27	-.04
28.	My superior tries to work with me for a proper understanding of a problem.	<u>.78</u>	.20	.23	-.16	-.010
<b>II. Obliging Style (OB)</b>						
2.	My superior generally tries to satisfy the needs of mine.	<b>.42</b>	<b>.50</b>	.18	.13	.03
10.	My superior usually accommodates the wishes of mine.	.27	<u>.85</u>	.07	-.10	.17
11.	My superior gives in to the wishes of mine.	.19	<u>.80</u>	.14	.009	.11
13.	My superior usually allows concessions to me.	.12	.30	.18	-.12	-.16
19.	My superior often goes along with the suggestions of mine.	.29	<u>.56</u>	.13	-.04	.13
24.	My superior tries to satisfy the expectations of mine.	.25	<u>.62</u>	.08	-.07	.18
<b>III. Compromising Style (CO)</b>						
7.	My superior tries to find a middle course to resolve an impasse.	.23	.11	.37	.13	.13
14.	My superior usually proposes a middle ground for breaking deadlocks.	.30	.07	<u>.60</u>	.12	-.03

Table 2. (Continued)

Item No	Conflict Styles/Items	IN I	OB II	CO III	DO IV	AV V
15.	My superior negotiates with me so that a compromise can be reached.	.31	.16	<b>.76</b>	.005	.005
20.	MY SUPERIOR USES "GIVE AND TAKE" SO THAT A COMPROMISE CAN BE MADE.	.24	.18	<b>.65</b>	.05	.03
IV. <u>Dominating Style (DO)</u>						
8.	My superior uses his/her influence to get his/her ideas accepted.	-.21	-.22	-.06	<b>.86</b>	.09
9.	My superior uses his/her authority to make a decision in his/her favor.	-.26	-.14	-.12	<b>.82</b>	.19
18.	My superior uses his/her expertise to make a decision in his/her favor.	-.12	-.05	.23	<b>.62</b>	.29
21.	My superior generally firm in pursuing his/her side of the issue.	-.18	-.03	.19	<b>.75</b>	.12
25.	My superior sometimes uses his/her power to win a competitive situation of a problem.	-.21	.08	.06	<b>.77</b>	.12
V. <u>Avoiding Style (AV)</u>						
3.	My superior attempts to avoid being "put on the spot" and try to keep our conflict to himself/herself.	.10	.12	.01	.12	<b>.47</b>
6.	My superior usually avoids open discussion of his/her differences with me.	-.15	.14	-.14	.18	<b>.54</b>
16.	My superior tries to stay away from disagreement with me.	-.05	-.11	.07	.13	<b>.62</b>
17.	My superior avoids an encounter with me.	-.17	-.008	-.10	.16	<b>.55</b>
26.	My superior tries to keep his/her disagreement to himself/herself in order to avoid hard feelings.	-.09	.13	.12	.02	<b>.69</b>
27.	My superior tries to avoid unpleasant exchanges with me.	-.06	.03	.08	.05	<b>.74</b>
Eigenvalues		8.7	4.2	2.4	1.6	1.2
% of variance explained		30.9	15.2	8.6	5.7	4.3

N = 139, Figure in bold indicate high loading

Maximum Likelihood with Varimax Rotation and Kaiser Normalization

Table 3. Multiple Regression Analysis: Conflict Style and Satisfaction with Supervision  
 Dependent variable: Satisfaction with supervision

Predicted Variables	b	Standard Error	Beta	T Value
Integrating	2.36	.60	.42	3.97**
Obliging	-.14	.61	-.02	-.23
Compromising	.86	.59	.12	1.45
Dominating	-1.60	.42	-.32	-3.81**
Avoiding	-.42	.62	-.05	-.68

F = 10.918

Significance F < 0.0001

R (adjusted) = .437

Intercept: a = 13.411

\* p < .10

\*\* p < 0001

Table 4. Pearson Correlations among Key Variables

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6
1 Integrating	1.000					
2 Obliging	.493**	1.000				
3 Avoiding	-.203	.177*	1.000			
4 Compromising	.519**	.352**	.004	1.000		
5 Dominating	-.429**	-.155 <sup>n</sup>	.327**	.015	1.000	
6 Satisfaction with supervision	.622**	.289**	-.238**	.331**	-.495**	1.000

\* Correlation is significant at the .05 level (2 tailed)

\*\* Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2 tailed)

<sup>n</sup> correlation is marginally significant at .10

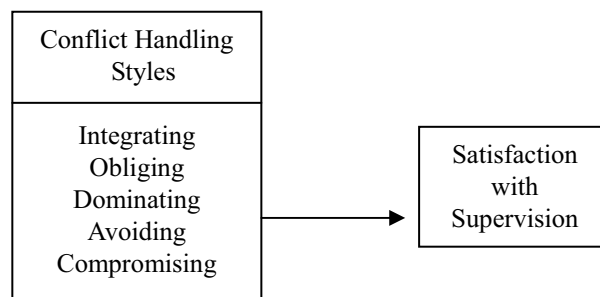


Figure 1. Model of Conflict Handling Style and Interactions

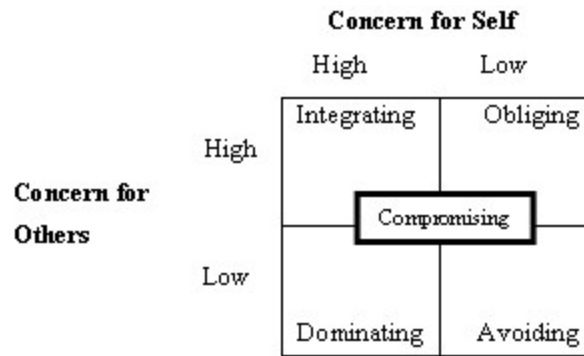


Figure 2. The Styles of Handling Interpersonal Conflict

Note: Adapted from Rahim and Bonoma (1979)