Interpersonal Conflict Management Strategies in Private Universities of Bangladesh

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Abstract: In society, where different interest groups exist, conflict is a common occurrence. Whether it is a personal or professional or organizational life, conflict arises when individuals or groups interact to meet their goals. Thus conflict management is an integral part of organizational relations. The emerging leaders and top-level management in the private universities are managing this crucial subject successfully. As a result since the inception in 1992, there seemed to be a few noticeable disturbances in the private universities of Bangladesh. This research aims at assessing the conflict management strategies of these leaders of private universities in Bangladesh. 29 high officials including Vice Chancellors, Pro Vice Chancellors, Registrars and Deans randomly chosen from 8 top ranked universities out of 54 private universities. They have been interviewed using a structured questionnaire to assess the conflict management strategies. The research reveals that these leaders and top-level management follow a collaborative approach in managing conflict in the organization. Their contingency approach of leadership helps them to gain trust of their followers and handle dynamic and unique situation. Standing on this background they could easily gain a win-win situation in any conflict situation. This paper is expected to help the new leaders to understand the conflict management strategies of these successful leaders over that of traditional leaders.

1. Introduction

Conflict is a common phenomenon in any organization where different interest groups exist. In the organizational settings different groups or even individuals come with versatile interests, which they want to satisfy. When these interests clash with one another conflict is obvious. However the organization wants to manage the conflict in a way that would bring benefits to itself and to maintain a congenial environment. The ability to understand and correctly diagnose conflict is essential to properly manage it.

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Thus conflict management consists of diagnostic processes, interpersonal (between individuals) styles, negotiating strategies, and other interventions that are designed to avoid unnecessary conflict and reduce or resolve excessive conflict (Hellriegel, Slocum and Woodman, 1998, p. 363). But conflict has different dimensions. As a result, diagnostic process requires different approaches depending on context. Even where two persons from different cultures perceive the same conflict, their conflict management styles may differ because conflict management styles must be consistent with the person's personal and cultural value system (Rahim and Blum, 1995).

With an objective of spreading higher education in Bangladesh at present 54 private universities are working. Most of the universities try to follow a structured organizational system as competition is there. Considering the business rules, objectives and formal system each and every university must follow a hierarchy structure. According to that structure the top management plays the vital role to manage both administrative and academic personnel. Universities have achieved a position in and trust of the society by their performance. Like other business firms, top management is liable to earn profit as well as to meet the expectation of different groups: administration, students, faculties and owners. However, from 1992 to 2006, a very few unrest has been observed in these private universities. Definitely top management in these universities follow effective conflict management strategies. This paper tries to explore the interpersonal conflict management strategy followed in the private universities of Bangladesh. The first section of this study states what to expect from this paper. The second section gives a theoretical overview on conflict management and the last chapter gives the finding of the study.

1.2 Objective

This paper tries to explore the interpersonal conflict management strategies of the private universities of Bangladesh.

Thus, the objective of this study is to identify interpersonal conflict management strategies followed by the top management of the private universities of Bangladesh.

1.3 Methodology and Data Source

1.3.1 Data Collection Method

Both primary and secondary data have been used in this study. For primary data, face-to-face interviews of Vice Chancellors, Pro Vice Chancellors, Deans and Registrars of different private universities have been taken. Besides that, a structured questionnaire (see appendix-1) has been used. A scale of preference (1 to 5) has been used for the close-ended questions. Besides the primary data, secondary information have been collected from books and published materials.

1.3.2 Data Analysis Method and Ranking

Mostly descriptive statistics has been used in analyzing the data. The data (primary) have been summarized in a table according to their importance. Commonality is done by calculating the percentage for each response in terms of total numbers of respondent.

Methods of calculation of relative importance of the factors and ranking the strategies of interpersonal conflict management **mean scores of relative importance (MSRI)** has been used, which was developed by Alam in 1983 (Alam, 1986).

$$MSRI = \frac{\sum W + (n-f)N}{n}$$

Where, $\sum W$ = Total sum of cardinal weights assigned to different degrees of importance for the factor in question pointed out by the respondent.

n = Total sample size (total number of respondent)

f = Total number of respondents pointed out the factor in question (the frequency of the factor)

N = Total number of factors contributing to identify conflict management strategies pointed out by any of the respondents.

Final analysis is based on these responses and corresponding ranking.

1.3.3 Sampling Plan: Eight private universities were chosen randomly. The Vice Chancellor, Pro Vice Chancellor, Dean of different faculties and Registrar of the eight private universities were taken as sample. Most of the universities are top ranked according to the report of UGC.

1.3.4 Sample size: Total number of respondent is twenty nine. Respondents are holding the top management positions in different private universities.

2. Literature Review

Conflict is a process in which one party perceives that its interests are being opposed or negatively affected by another party (Wall and Callister, 1995, p.551). Conflict can occur within an employee, between individuals or groups, and across organizations as they compete. Five primary levels of conflict may be presented in organizations: Intrapersonal (within an individual), Interpersonal (between individual), Intragroup (within a group), Intergroup (between groups), and Interorganizational (between organizations). (Hellriegel, Slocum, and Woodman, 1998, p. 366)

Figure: 1   Levels of Conflict in Organizations

| Interorganizational |
| Intergroup |
| Intragroup |
| Interpersonal |
| Intrapersonal |
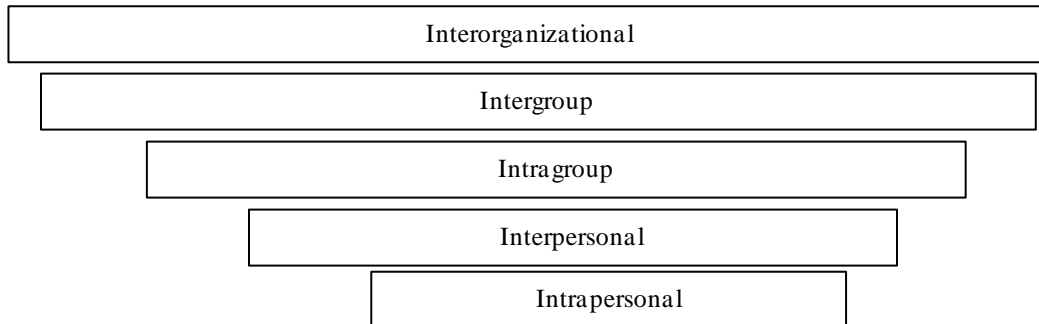
Interorganizational conflict is the common practice in the business world. It is a situation in which two or more organization feel themselves in opposition reason for the competition over scarce resources, over the goals to attain, to capture the market share etc. Other than the Interorganizational conflict, rest of the levels of conflicts remain within the boundary of the organization. ***Intragroup conflict*** involves clashes among some or all of the group's members, which often affect the group's processes and effectiveness. Family run businesses can be especially prone to severe intragroup and other types of conflicts. (Kabanoff, 1991, p.416). Whereas ***Intergroup conflict*** refers to opposition and clashes between groups or teams. It often occurs in union management relations. Such conflicts may be highly intense, drawn out, and costly to those involved. Under extreme conditions of competition and conflict, the parties develop attitudes toward each other that are characterized by distrust, rigidity, a focus only on self- interest, failure to listen, and the like (Hellriegel, slocum & Woodman, 1998, p. 371).

Intrapersonal Conflict occurs within an individual and usually involves some form of goal, cognitive, or affective conflict. It is triggered when a person's behavior will result in outcomes that are mutually exclusive (Locke, Erez and Schaeffer, 1994, p. 67). Inner tensions and frustrations commonly result. Whereas, ***Interpersonal Conflict*** refers to two or more individuals who perceive that their attitudes, behaviours, or preferred goals are in opposition. As with intrapersonal conflicts, many interpersonal conflicts are based on some type of **role conflict** or **role ambiguity.** A role is the cluster of tasks and behaviours that others expect a person to perform in doing a job. Role Conflict refers to a focal person perceiving incompatible messages and pressures from the role senders. Role senders are the individuals who have expectations of how the focal person should behave. Role ambiguity is the uncertainty or lack or clarity surrounding expectations about a single role (Ilgen & Hollenbeck, 1991, p. 167). Like role conflict, severe role ambiguity causes stress and triggers subsequent coping behaviours. These coping behaviours often include firstly, aggressive action like theft, violence, verbal abuse and hostile

communication, secondly, withdrawal, and / or finally, approaching the role sender or senders to attempt joint problem solving (Hellriegel, Slocum and Woodman, 1998, pp. 369-70). Whetten and Cameron (1991) propose that there are four major sources of interpersonal conflict.

    a. **Personal differences**: Everyone has a unique background because of his or her upbringing, cultural and family traditions, and socialization processes. Because no one has the same family background, education, and values, the differences can be a major source of conflict.

    b. **Information deficiency:** This source of conflict results from communication break-down in the organization. It may be that the two people in conflict are using different information or that one or both have misinformation. Unlike personal differences, this source of conflict is not emotionally charged and once corrected, there is little resentment.

    c. **Role incompatibility**: This type of interpersonal conflict draws from both intra-individual role conflict and intergroup conflict. Specifically, in today's horizontal organizations, top and mid level management have functions and tasks that are highly interdependent. However, the individual roles of these personnel may be incompatible.

    d. **Environmental stress**: These types of conflict can be amplified by a stressful environment. In environments characterized by scarce or shrinking resources, downsizing, competitive pressures or high degrees of uncertainty, conflict of all kinds will be more probable.

2.1 Interpersonal Conflict Management Style

Interpersonal Conflict Management process considers the perceptions, expectations, and values that people bring to the relationship. Some people enter a conflict with a **win-win orientation**. This is the perception that the parties will find a mutually beneficial solution to their disagreement. They believe that the resources at stake are expandable rather than fixed if the parties work together to find a creative solution. Other people enter a conflict with a **win-lose orientation**. They adopt the belief that the parties are drawing from a fixed pie, so the more one party receives, the more the other party forfeits. (Mcshane and Glinow, 2000, p. 409). Conflict tends to escalate when the parties develop a win-lose orientation because they rely on power and politics to gain advantage. A win-lose orientation may occasionally be appropriate when the conflict really is over a fixed resource, but few organizational conflicts are due to perfectly opposing interests with fixed resources. To varying degrees, the opposing groups can gain by believing that their positions aren't perfectly opposing and that creative solutions are possible.

Adopting a win-win or win-lose orientation influences the way people approach the conflict, including their actions toward the other person. Renowned organizational behaviour scholars like Mcshane and Glinow (2000), T.L. Ruble and K.Thomas (1976) have categorized five interpersonal styles of approaching the other party in a conflict situation. Figure: 2 shows that each approach can be placed in a two dimensional grid reflecting the person's motivation to satisfy his or her own interests (called assertiveness) and to satisfy the other party's interests (called cooperativeness). Collaboration is the only style that represents a purely win-win orientation. The other four styles represent variations of the win-lose approach. The management personnel of the private universities apply different conflict management styles to different situations.

Figure: 2 Interpersonal Conflict Management Style
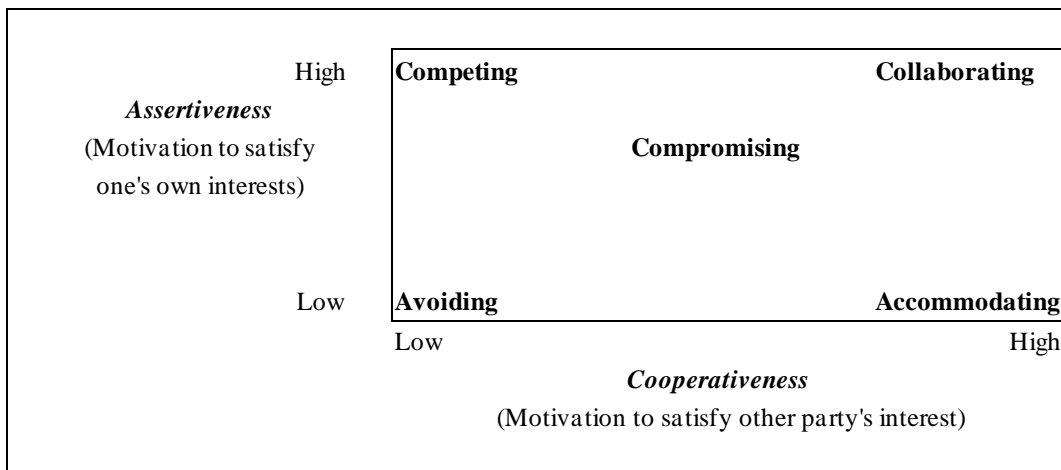
Source: Mcshane & Glinow, (2000, p. 410) , which is originally adapted from T.L. Ruble and K. Thomas, (1976). Support for a Two-Dimensional Model of Conflict Behavior, *Organizatinal Behavior and Human Performance 16*, p. 145.

3. Findings and Analysis:

3.1 Characteristics and Management of the Universities

- The management positions of the universities are not stable but changing, indeterminate and uncertain.
- Services of the universities are dynamic according to the need of the society.
- Linguistic and non-linguistic practices are central to the process of knowledge.
- Since knowledge is socially produced, those who have authority define and interpret truth.

As people become free to make decisions, they internalize authority. It is because persons have to rely in greater measure on their own personal authority. They bring more of their skills, ideas, feelings, and values to their work. Based on field research in administration and his own firsthand observations of executives in the workplace, Katz (1955) suggested that effective administration depends on three basic personal skills: technical, human, and conceptual (p.34). Following table shows that experiences and skills of the top management position in the private universities.

Table 1: Experiences of the top management

Experiences	N	Minimum (Years)	Maximum (Years)	Average
As an academician	29	0	44	28.03
As an administrator	29	1	49	13.41

Average experience as an academician is 28 years, and as an administrator is 13 years. This indicates that they are proven to hold the management position, which also indicates that before working for private university they worked for public universities or for other educational institutions as the maximum age of the private universities are at most 14 years. (from 1992-2006). So, management relies on their person rather than their role to find their authority. Thus organizational control in a private university should be implemented by personal power, rather than legitimate power.

3.2 Culture of Openness: In the private universities of Bangladesh, the top management position willingly becomes dependent on followers and vulnerable to their mistakes because the empowered subordinates support him or her. It leads to open organizational culture. Without such a culture the universities are likely to fail. To facilitate a culture of openness, subordinates must first build new relationships to authority. Management make themselves more vulnerable to their subordinate. To solve a problem 65.51 percent of the total respondent discuss the problem with their subordinate; *devote* high level energy; and give the solution to their superior. This indicates that this open pattern of culture is a remedy for the negative elements of legitimate authority.

3.3 Strategies

The top management of the private universities follow Collaborating Style. 64.86 percent personnel of the total respondents try to find a mutually beneficial solution for both parties. An important feature of collaboration is information sharing so that both parties can identify common ground and potential solutions that satisfy both (or all) of them, but specially, it is best according to their view when they do not have perfectly opposing interests and when they have enough trust and openness to share information. This is desirable because a university is the place of openness and of course the place of sharing information.

**Table 2: Interpersonal Conflict Management Strategies of
the top management of private universities.**

Conflict Management Style	Total no. support individual style	In %
Collaborating	24	64.86
Accommodating	5	13.51
Competing	4	10.81
Avoiding	3	8.11
Compromising	1	2.70

Table 3: Ranking the Conflict Management strategies

Rank	Conflict Management Style	n	f	N	$\sum W$	MSRI $= \dfrac{\sum W + (n-f)N}{n}$
1	Collaborating	29	15	15	356	19.52
2	Compromising	29	15	15	278	16.82
3	Accommodating	29	15	15	274	16.68
4	Competing	29	15	15	257	16.10
5	Avoiding	29	15	15	241	15.55

On the other hand 13.51 percent management personnel follow the style Accommodating, which means accommodating own selves with other interest. This style may appropriate when the other party has substantially more power. Deans of the university always accommodating with Vice Chancellor, because some issues are there, which is not as much important to Deans as to the Vice Chancellor. Competing is not suitable for the university except academic competition, though 10.81percent personnel trying to win the conflict at the other's expense. This style has the strongest win-lose orientation. The Deans and Registrar argue that this is necessary when they know that for a particular situation they are correct and the dispute requires a quick solution. But at the least preference 8.11 percent think that Avoiding may be the best approach when the issue is trivial or as a temporary tactic to cool down heated disputes. Only 2.70 percent respondent under specific situation follow the Compromising style when there is little hope for mutual gain through problem solving, both parties have equal power, and both are under time pressure to settle their differences like Deans of the different faculties.

However, specifically Deans of the different faculties and also registrar follow the different conflict management style under different situation. According to their opinion they use different style and even their attitudes some times differ when they are in rush with administrative personnel or officers or with teachers. So the same person under different situation follows the different conflict management style.

4. Conclusion

Conflict is ubiquitous irrespective of business, society and country. The nature of conflict management strategies followed by managers is partly influenced by the context, personal characteristics, cultural and family background. In foremost cases the top management of the private universities is found to use the collaborating style with contingency leadership approach. The collaborative approach helps them to identify a common ground to solve the problem. This common ground helps to build an atmosphere where the parties involved in conflict gain a sense of victory. On the other hand the contingency leadership approach helps them to deal with unique and dynamic situation. Using these strategies the top management of the private universities have become successful to maintain a congenial environment in the organization where different interest groups actively involve in satisfying their needs.

The emerging leaders and top managers in this sector should follow these strategies to become successful. A further research could be conducted with a same view in the public universities of Bangladesh to improve the conflict situation of these universities.

5. References

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Appendix

Personal Information:

Full name:

_____

Present Occupation(Designation & University) :

_____

Experience as an academician (only): _____ *years.*

Total experience as an administrator and academician: _____ *years.*

Your father was: *(Please tick)*   a. an academician   b.   a   businessman
c. a Govt. service holder

             d. a private service holder.   e. others

Formal Questionnaire:

Q 1:   To make a decision about a complex problem:

a. You are confident enough to solve that problem. So that discuss the problem with your subordinate together with your limitations, provide high level energy and give the logical solution to your superior.

b. You are confident enough to solve that problem. So that discuss the problem with your subordinate, direct him to solve, check the solution and give the solution to your superior.

c. You are not confident enough so that discuss the problem with your subordinate together with your limitations, inform the problem to the superior, and provide high level energy to solve the problem.

d. You are not confident enough so that inform the matter to the superior, give your idea to the subordinate   and asked to solve the problem

e. Your are not confident enough so that inform the matter to the superior and asked the respective person to solve that.

Q2:   Circle the number that best indicates how well these statements describe you.

		Rarely				Always
1.	If someone disagrees with me, I vigorously defend my side of the issue.	1	2	3	4	5
2.	I go along with suggestions from co-workers, even if I don't agree with them.	1	2	3	4	5
3.	I give-and –take so that a compromise can be reached.	1	2	3	4	5
4.	I keep my opinions to myself rather than openly disagree with people.	1	2	3	4	5
5.	In disagreements or negotiations, I try to find the best possible solution for both sides by sharing information.	1	2	3	4	5
6.	I try to reach a middle ground in disputes with other people.	1	2	3	4	5
7.	I accommodate the wishes of people who have different points of view than my own.	1	2	3	4	5
8.	I avoid opening debating issues where there is disagreement.	1	2	3	4	5
9.	In negotiations, I hold on to my position rather than give in.	1	2	3	4	5
10.	I try to solve conflicts by finding solutions that benefit both me and the other person.	1	2	3	4	5
11.	I let co-workers have their way rather than jeopardize our relationship.	1	2	3	4	5
12.	I try to win my position in a discussion.	1	2	3	4	5
13.	I like to investigate conflicts with co-workers so that we can discover solutions that benefit both of us.	1	2	3	4	5
14.	I believe that it is not worth the time and trouble discussing my differences of opinion with other people.	1	2	3	4	5
15.	To reach an agreement, I give up some things in exchange for others.	1	2	3	4	5

Write the scores circled for each item on the appropriate line below (statement numbers are in brockets), and add up each scale. Higher scores indicate that the persons are stronger on that conflict management style.

Competing   --------- ---   +   ----------   +   ---------
-      =   --------

                        (1)   (9)   (12)

Accommodating   --------- ---   +   ----------   +
----------   =   --------

                        (2)   (7)   (11)

Compromising   --------- ---   +   ----------   +   ---------
-      =   --------

                        (3)   (6)   (15)

Avoiding   --------- ---   +   ----------   +   ---------
-      =   --------

                        (4)   (8)   (14)

Collaborating   --------- ---   +   ----------   +   ---------
-      =   --------

                        (5)   (10)   (13)

Sources: McShane, Steven L. (2000). *Organizational Behavior.* P. 430, which is originally adapted from M. A. Rahim, (1993). A Measure of Styles of Handling Interpersonal Conflict, *Academy of Management Journal 26,* June , pp. 368-376.