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Emotional Intelligence and Conflict Management: An Empirical Study in Indian Context

Tanu Sharma & Anil Sehrawat
Jaypee University of Information technology, Wagnaghat, Solan,
Himachal Pradesh- 173234, INDIA

Abstract: *The role of Emotional intelligence in the workplace has attracted the attention of researchers in the last two decades. Researchers have made many claims about the relationship between emotional intelligence and performance, job satisfaction, work motivation. The present study aims at extending the existing empirical base of emotional intelligence in Indian Context. The objective of the present study are to explore relationship between emotional intelligence and different styles of conflict management and to find out whether people differing in levels of emotional intelligence show a preference for a particular style of conflict management.*

Keywords: *Emotional intelligence, conflict management, job satisfaction, performance, diversity.*

I. Introduction

Salovey and Mayer [1] coined the term “Emotional Intelligence” to explain a different type of Intelligence but it became popular with the publication of Goleman’s book *Emotional Intelligence* [2]. Thereafter it became an important topic of research in the field of management. Mayer & Salovey (1997), defined emotional intelligence as the ability to perceive accurately, appraise, and express emotion; the ability to understand emotion and emotional knowledge; and the ability to regulate emotions to promote emotional and intellectual growth. Gardner explained emotional intelligence as a deep awareness of one's own emotions and the ability to label and draw upon those emotions as a resource to guide behavior [3]. Goleman defines EI as “the capacity for organizing our own feelings and those of others, for motivating ourselves and for managing emotions well in ourselves and in our relationships” [2, p.317].

Mayer and Salovey classified emotional intelligence in five domains- self-awareness, managing emotions, motivating oneself, empathy, and handling relationships [1]. Goleman later developed his four dimension model of emotional intelligence to include knowing and managing one’s emotions, self-motivation, empathy toward others, and social deftness [2]. According to Goleman there are five components of EQ at work. Self-Awareness refers to the ability to recognize and understand one’s own moods, emotions, and drives, as well as their effect on others; Self-Regulation refers to the ability to control or redirect one’s disruptive impulses and moods; Motivation refers to a passion to work for reasons that go beyond money or status; Empathy refers to the ability to understand the emotional framework of others, and Social Skill refers to proficiency in managing relationships and building networks [6].

Scholars like Neisser noted the distinction between academic intelligence and social intelligence [7]. Marlowe defined social intelligence as the ability to understand other people and social interactions and using this knowledge to lead and guide others to mutually satisfying outcomes [8]. Goleman has acclaimed EI as the best predictor of work and life success [2, 5]. Many scholars have made claim about the potential of EI to predict work outcomes, such as job satisfaction, turnover [5], and performance [9]. Researchers agreed that emotional intelligence is important for academic and career achievement [10, 11].

The use of EI tests for personnel selection purposes has been advocated, claiming a strong correlation between EI and job performance. Goleman also claimed that employees with high EI are “star performers.” [5] These claims, however, have been strongly criticized as being implausible and lacking empirical support [12] 2000a). Scholars have criticized these claims argue that these claims are based on unpublished studies, anecdotal accounts, and misinterpreted data [13, 14].

The interest in EQ is growing with increasing organizational change and organizational contextual volatility [15]. Moreover, global mergers and acquisitions, growing number of MNC’s have increased the pace of organizational change and cultural diversity. Organizational change is frequently associated with emotional conflict or interpretative conflict [15]. In such a situation awareness of the style employees use to handle conflicts would be helpful [16, 17, 18]. The term conflict has been employed in different ways reflecting the different levels at which conflicts exist [19, 20]. Thomas has given two broad uses of the term conflict. The first use refers to incompatible response tendencies within an individual, e.g., behavioral conflicts where one must choose whether or not to pursue a particular course of action or a goal, or role conflict where one must choose between several competing sets of role demands. The second use refers to conflicts that occur between different individuals, groups, organizations, or other social units [20]. Hence, the terms interpersonal, inter-group, and

inter-organizational conflict are used. Putnam and Poole and Thomas on the basis of their analysis of numerous conceptualizations and definitions of conflict identified three characteristics: interdependence, disagreement, and interference [22, 20, 21]. **Interdependence** exists when each party involved depends, at least in part on the actions of the other for the attainment of their goals. Without Interdependence, the actions of each party have no impact on the outcomes of the other party. Therefore, interdependence is an essential pre-condition of any conflict situation, providing an interpersonal context in which conflicts may arise. **Disagreement** exists when parties involved think that different values, needs, interests, opinions, goals, or objectives exist. In interpersonal conflict, disagreement is a key component. However, disagreeing parties will not experience conflict when the point of disagreement is irrelevant or unimportant (for e.g., when there is no interdependence, or when the issue of disagreement is minor). **Interference** exists when one party interferes with or opposes the other party's attainment of its, objectives, goals or interests. Many researchers believe that the core process of interpersonal conflict is the behavior where one or more disputants oppose their counterpart's interests or goals [23]. The role of negative emotion (jealousy, anger, anxiety, or frustration) has been emphasized into conceptualizations of conflict by many researchers [24, 25, 26, 27, 20, 21]. These emotions are thought to emerge when there are major disagreements, or when parties interfere with the attainment of each others' important goals. Therefore, a fourth property, negative emotion, can also be added. In this study, we focus on interpersonal conflict which has been defined in many different ways [21, 23].

Researchers Within the conflict domain have identified a number of conflict management styles and their role in satisfactory management and resolution of conflicts have been identified [28, 29, 22, 30, 21, 23]. Several measures assessing styles of conflict management have also been developed [31, 32, 33]. Traditionally, five different styles of conflict management: asserting, accommodating, compromising, problem-solving, and avoiding are classified. These styles are seen as general strategies or behavioral orientations that individuals adopt for managing and resolving conflicts.

Asserting style occurs when individuals strive to win. In this style one party gains at the cost of the gains of other party. Conflict, therefore, is considered a win-lose situation. Like asserting, **accommodating style** occurs when individuals sacrifice their own needs and desires in order to satisfy the needs of other parties. This occurs as individuals oblige or yield to others' positions, or cooperate in an attempt to resolve conflicts. **Compromising** style frequently splits the difference or involves give and take behaviors where each party wins some and loses some. **Problem-solving style** occurs when individuals involved in conflict try to fully satisfy the concerns of all parties. In this style, actions are aimed at the achievement of goals and objectives of all parties. Hence, it results as a win-win solution. At last, **avoiding style** occurs when individuals are indifferent to the concerns of other party and refuse to act or participate in conflict. Here, one party withdraws, physically or psychologically, abdicating all responsibility for the solution.

Literature in this field reflects that cooperative styles (problem solving, accommodating and compromising) are positively associated with constructive conflict management and with individual and organizational outcomes [34] and show substantial concern for the other party. Among these three, problem solving style is generally perceived as the most appropriate, most effective, and highly competent style in managing conflicts [35, 36]. Weider-Hatfield and Hatfield found problem-solving positively related to interpersonal outcomes [37]. Burke suggested that, in general, problem solving style was related to the effective management of conflict, while asserting and avoiding were related to the ineffective management of conflict [38]. Lawrence and Lorsch suggested that a confrontation style dealing with intergroup conflict was used to a significantly greater degree in higher than lower performing organizations [39].

Scholars believe that an individual's EI influences one's way of handling interpersonal conflict. Individuals with high EI may be more effective in resolving conflict than those with low EI [5, 40]. Jordon and Troth emphasized that individuals with high EI prefer to seek cooperative solutions when confronted with conflict [13]. Goleman suggested that emotionally intelligent employees are better at negotiation and effectively handling of their conflicts with organizational members [5].

A growing number of scholars suggest that emotional intelligence (EI) plays an important role in managing interpersonal conflicts [16]. However, there is little or no empirical data on relationships between EI and handling interpersonal conflicts conducted in an Indian organizational context. To bridge the gap, the present study seeks to explore the relationship between Emotional Intelligence and conflict management styles.

II. Method and Objectives of the study

The objective of the study was to explore the relationship between emotional intelligence and conflict management.

Sample

A sample of 100 working mid-level managers from different organizations of north India was selected. The subjects thus covered in the study were the willing participants drawn from a mix of socio-economic backgrounds in the 28-45 years age range.

Data Collection

The study was limited to organizations established in North India. The managers were contacted personally with each organization and requested to complete the survey questionnaire in 30 minutes. All participants completed the surveys in their scheduled time.

Instrumentation

Emotional Competence Inventory (ECI) by Boyatzis et al. was used in this study to measure emotional intelligence [41]. It consists of 80 items that reflect adaptive tendency toward emotional intelligence. Each item in the questionnaire described a work-related behavior. Respondents used a 7-point Likert scale. Higher the score, greater the tendency an individual possessed to exhibit emotionally intelligent behavior. ECI is divided into the following four sub-skills, as defined in Goleman's (2001) emotional intelligence model: *Self-awareness*, *Self-management*, *Social awareness*, and *Relationship management*. An average for each cluster was found by summing responses (1-7) to the corresponding questions that pertain to a cluster.

A questionnaire measuring Interpersonal Conflict and Conflict Management Styles adapted by Barki and Hartwick was used In addition to the ECI [42]. In this questionnaire, twenty items, adapted from previous measures were used to assess the extent to which students employed five styles (problem-solving, asserting, avoiding, compromising, and accommodating) [31, 33]. For each style, two items inquired respondent's own behaviors, and two items asked about the behaviors of the other party(ies). Conceptually, these indices measure the overall usage of each style by everyone involved, and not only the respondent's own usage of the style. The style items assessed these behaviors on 7-point scales ranging from 1 (never) to 7 (always).

III. Results

First of all, the reliability of the data was tested by computing Cronbach's Alpha Model. The variable wise reliability coefficients are emotional intelligence $\alpha = .823$ and conflict management $\alpha = .673$. The descriptive statistics of the data are given in table 1.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of the Data N=100

Variable	Range of scores	Min score	Max score	Mean score	Std. Dev.
Self-awareness	0 - 105	44	99	73.11	10.38
Self-management	0 - 182	59	169	127.24	18.37
Social-awareness	0 - 105	28	116	80.65	11.27
Social-skill	0 - 168	13	165	125.37	21.02
Emotional Intelligence	0 - 560	180	514	406.36	51.46
Problem Solving	0 -28	4	28	20.43	4.16
Asserting	0 - 28	4	28	18.93	4.43
Avoiding	0 - 28	2	27	14.04	5.43
Compromising	0 - 28	4	28	18.61	4.26
Accommodating	0 - 28	5	27	17.48	4.07

The Pearson correlation coefficients were used to examine any relationship that may exist between emotional intelligence measure and different styles of conflict management.

Table 2: Correlation between the Emotional Intelligence sub-scales and Conflict Management styles

Variables ↓→	Problem Solving	Asserting	Avoiding	Compromising	Accommodating
Self Awareness	0.095	0.228*	0.069	0.273**	0.044
Self Management	0.394**	0.405**	-0.041	0.333**	0.350**
Social Awareness	0.475**	0.507**	-0.060	0.357**	0.363**
Social Skills	0.332**	0.441**	-0.068	0.331**	0.290**
Emotional Intelligence	0.409**	0.474**	-0.037	0.383**	0.238**

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level, * Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

Table 2 presents the correlations between EI skills and different styles of conflict management. **Self awareness** has a significant positive correlation with asserting and compromising styles of conflict management, and there is no relationship between problem solving, avoiding and accommodating styles of conflict management. **Self management** has significant and positive correlation with problem solving, asserting, compromising and accommodating styles of conflict management. It has significant relationship with avoiding styles of conflict management. **Social awareness** is positively and significantly correlated with problem solving, asserting, compromising and accommodating styles of conflict management. It has no relationship with avoiding style of conflict management. **Social skills** are positively correlated with problem solving, asserting, compromising and accommodating styles of conflict management. Emotional intelligence as a single variable has a positive and

significant correlation with problem solving, asserting, compromising and accommodating styles of conflict management. However, there is no correlation between EI and avoiding style of conflict management. The results show that EI of an individual affects his handling of a conflict situation. It means that knowledge of self and of others helps in the resolution of conflicts and through collaborative and cooperative methods.

IV. Discussion

In the present study, presents the correlation between sub-scales- self awareness, self management, Social awareness and social skills of emotional intelligence and five styles- problem-solving, asserting, avoiding, compromising and accommodating of handling conflict.

The literature suggests that EI has been associated with cooperative solutions, which results in more effective conflict management. The results showed significant influence of EI on problem solving, asserting, compromising and accommodating styles. EI has no significant relationship with avoiding style. Social awareness or empathy refers to the awareness of others' feelings, needs, and concerns. According to Goleman empathy involves understanding others, developing others, and having a service orientation [2]. It implies that the more an individual understands others/colleagues, the more likely he or she will use the problem solving style to handle conflict.

EI is positively correlated asserting dominating style of handling conflict. It is surprising because asserting style maximizes one's own needs at the expense of the other individuals' needs [43]. This result matches with the study of Yu, Sardesai, Lu and Zhao [44]. Further exploration found that integrating, dominating, and compromising share one characteristic: concern for self. Concern for self is one of the two basic dimensions that differentiate the five styles of handling conflict. Concern for self explains the degree to which a person attempts to satisfy his or her own interests [45]. However, no specific reason can be given for this outcome but we can say that in South Asia people use self-awareness in deciding their self-interests.

V. Managerial implications

The globalization and privatization of the workplace has lead to increasing organizational change and organizational contextual volatility, which, in turn, produce increasing differences and conflicts [46] as cited in [44]. Furthermore, Indian organizations are involved in mergers and acquisitions at international level that result in workforce diversity and cultural differences that is another major reason of conflicts among employees. Therefore, the findings of this study have importance to Indian organizations in managing conflicts.

The problem-solving style is generally perceived to be a more appropriate, effective, and competent style in managing conflict. Individuals who have better self-awareness also recognize their strengths, weaknesses, needs, and drives. Additionally, these people know how their feelings affect themselves, other people, and their job performance [6]. Self-regulation is an important component of social development and it contributes to the quality of interpersonal relationships [47]. Empathy involves understanding others, developing others, and having a service orientation [2]. Self-regulation and empathy can be developed [48' 49]. To manage a conflict effectively it becomes necessary for a manager to adopt and develop an integrative style. Salovey noted in an interview with Goleman that emotional intelligence abilities are learned and tend to improve as one ages and matures. Therefore, organizations have to consciously and continuously strive to inculcate self-regulation and empathy among their managers through an effective programme of training and development [50].

VI. Limitations and future directions

The limitations of the study are first, it is an exploratory study that examines the relationship between EI and conflict management styles in the Indian context. As in any cross-sectional studies, data collected at a single moment in time may limit the accuracy of this research. As such, a longitudinal study could be considered in order to get convincing evidence of the relationship between EI and conflict management styles.

Second in this study, the data is self reported, therefore, subject to limitation of the process. In addition, the scales used to evaluate EI and conflict management styles were developed by Western scholars and tested in a Western setting. Thus, the investigators' indigenous culture is likely to bias the design of the research instrument (Hofstede, 1991; Adler et al., 1989). Therefore, it would be desirable to develop a scale to measure EI and conflict management styles based on the Indian context.

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