

## Conflict management styles among managers in Macedonian organizations\*\*

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### ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** The purpose of this paper is to examine Macedonian managers' behavior and the strategy they most often have facing a conflict situation at work.

**Design/methodology/approach:** Research instrument in a form of questionnaire was used to obtain data about strategies for managing conflict. For assessing which of the five modes: competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding and accommodating Macedonian managers' use we used Thomas-Kilmann conflict mode instrument.

**Findings:** The results from the study give new insights in the managerial mind, providing information about managers' approaches they have facing problems and conflict situations.

**Research limitations/implications:** There is a literature gap in the area of organizational behavior studies in Macedonia. The results from the survey can be used for comparing the profile of Macedonian managers with managers from other countries.

**Practical implications:** This study will increase the understanding of how managers' behavior is connected with conflict management styles. Also, the results from the study can be used in creating new teams and predicting behavior based on the styles used in learning and conflict resolution.

**Originality/value:** This research contributes to the field of organizational behavior by offering support and new findings. This study adds to the body of literature in what is considered relatively new and unexplored area of study in Macedonia. Also, this study will provide information about the behavior Macedonian managers have and clearer picture of their managerial style.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Conflicts can be seen as good and/or bad things. They are part of the organizations and if effectively managed can bring new qualities in the relationships, organizational growth and performance. One of the reasons why individuals get in conflict is lack of communication, differences in personality traits, differences in managerial style, and also differences in learning style and approaches in problem solving. The negative effect of conflicts can be higher level of stress, retention, turnover, absenteeism etc. For managers, it is important to be aware of their own processes, as well as recognizing and respecting the differences other employees have. Lot of research shows that managers spend up to 30 percent of their time to handle conflict and that is why successful conflict management is important as other functions:

planning, communication, motivation, controlling (Watson and Hoffman, 1996). That is a huge investment in time, which is equivalent to lot of money. Efficient conflict management means surfacing conflicts quickly and setting them cleanly, which leads to better productivity, less stress and money spent on conflict management programs. Also, decision makings is positively affected by good conflict management and leads to innovative decisions, which are vital for organizations that aspire to be learning organizations or to compete on the basis of rapid adaptation and innovation.

When conflicts are treated badly, they can be harmful for the whole organization-a lot of time and energy can be spent for handling conflicts, lot of bad decisions can be made, procrastinate and resist changes. In conflicts situations people invest their emotions, very often negative emotions, which can be an obstacle for resolving the problem or creating new conflicts. In problematic situations personal goals can be put first, neglecting organizational goals. Conflicts are correlated with stress, low productivity, turnover, frustration etc. But, on the other hand, conflict can stimulate great changes and new reorganizations, restructuring, creating new products and services. They can be motivating, and seen as driver for finding better solutions, and can bring employees closer together. Conflicts can be seen as great learning situations, gaining new experiences and insights on personal and organizational level. It is of great importance to know conflict management styles in different cultures, in order to use the information in negotiating, creating cross-cultural teams and getting better results.

## **2. CONFLICT MANAGEMENT STYLES AND MANAGERS**

In traditional way, conflicts were perceived as negative and as obstacles for prosperity, with a tendency of avoiding conflict situations. The modern approach toward conflicts is emphasizing that conflicts are part of human nature and inevitable for progress. In organizations conflict is observed as a creative force and carefully managed can lead to innovations and growth (Deutsch & Coleman, 2000). The dysfunctional conflict among individuals has proved to have a negative impact on organizational efficacy and performance (Zartman, 2000). Also, it has been shown that effective conflict management has a straightforward and positive impact on team cohesion. Effective conflict management can change downside effect of relationship conflict and task conflict on team cohesion to some positive impact (Alper, Tjosvold, Law, 2000).

Conflict can be defined as an incongruity of desires, goals or values between individuals or groups (Fisher, 1990). Another definition of conflict is “an expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce rewards, and interference with other party in achieving their goals” (Hocker & Wilmot, 1991, p. 23).

Sometimes in conflict situations individuals perceive threats (power, emotional, physical) to their well-being or pressure to change their actions. Very often individuals in conflicts tend to respond based on the perceptions they have, rather than the objective review of the situation. There are lots of causes that can initiate a conflict, like poor communication, desire to obtain power, lack of resources, ineffective

leadership, and lack of sincerity. In organizational context, for managers is important to be aware of the possibilities to prevent conflicts, and if they occur, ways to manage conflict and conflict resolution.

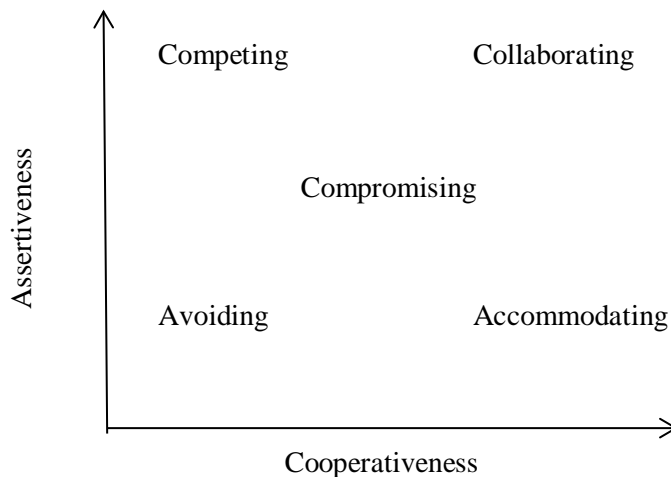
Individuals tend to use different strategies when facing a conflict, depending on the circumstances, the relationship with the other individual, the sources of conflict, previous experience, the need and wishes of the individual at the moment. A common definition is that people choose five different strategies facing a conflict: Avoiding, Accommodating, Competing, Compromising and Collaborating (Deutsch and Coleman, 2000).

One of the most popular and most frequently used instruments to measure conflict management styles is based on the Thomas-Kilmann model. Thomas and Kilmann do not suggest that all conflict is best resolved by searching for a win/win situation. Indeed, there are a number of different ways to deal with conflict and each of these modes of conflict handling can be useful under different sets of circumstances. For example, following the five conflict-handling modes identified by Thomas and Kilmann, each of the following may be appropriate under divergent circumstances:

- “two heads are better than one” (collaborating);
- “kill your enemies with kindness” (accommodating);
- “split the difference” (compromising);
- “leave well enough alone” (avoiding);
- “might makes fight” (competing).

The Thomas-Kilmann conflict mode instrument (TKI) assesses an individual’s behavior in conflict situations, along two dimensions: assertiveness (the extent to which the individual attempts to satisfy his or her own concerns) and cooperativeness (the extent to which the individual attempts to satisfy other person’s concerns (Thomas & Kilmann, 1974, 1976).

The extent to which a given conflict-handling mode is effective depends on the requirements of the specific conflict situation and the skill with which it is used. In this sense in any given situation a particular mode of handling conflict may be more suitable than others. Furthermore, every individual is capable of using all five conflict-handling modes; nobody can be characterized as having a single, inflexible style of dealing with conflict, although some people will be more inclined than others to use certain modes. The conflict behaviours of individuals, therefore, are a combination of their personal characteristics and the requirements of the circumstances within which they find themselves. This is important and is the purpose of the Thomas-Kilmann conflict mode instrument. In addition to the conflict-handling modes, Thomas and Kilmann developed their model further by indicating that all reactions to conflict stem from two general impulses. First, assertive behaviour, the desire to satisfy personal concerns and, second, non-assertive behaviour, the desire to satisfy the concerns of others (Figure 1).



**Figure 1:** Conflict grid

Source: According to Thomas & Kilmann, 1976

*Competing* (forcing) is assertive and uncooperative—an individual pursues his own concerns at the other person's expense. In a general sense, competitively oriented people often act in an aggressive and uncooperative manner. This is a power-oriented mode in which you use whatever power seems appropriate to win your own position—your ability to argue, your rank, or economic sanctions. Competing means "standing up for your rights," defending a position which you believe is correct, or simply trying to win. The situation is often one of win-lose, with attempts to dominate being common. The use of this style is productive when the situation is urgent, and decisions have to be made fast.

*Accommodating* (soothing) is unassertive and cooperative—the complete opposite of competing. When accommodating, the individual neglects his own concerns to satisfy the concerns of the other person; there is an element of self-sacrifice in this mode. Accommodating might take the form of selfless generosity or charity, obeying another person's order when you would prefer not to, or yielding to another's point of view. Those people who tend towards accommodation are more concerned about pleasing others than with meeting their own needs. They tend to be non-assertive and co-operative. People who practice this style of conflict management give up their needs and wants in order to keep the peace and make others happy. Managers should use this style when the problem is more important for the others person, or they should act strategically and invest in future cooperation and collaboration with the other party.

*Avoiding* (withdrawal) is unassertive and uncooperative—the person neither pursues his own concerns nor those of the other individual. Thus he does not deal with the conflict. Avoiding might take the form of diplomatically sidestepping an issue, postponing an issue until a better time or simply withdrawing from a threatening situation. People who practice the avoiding style tend to behave as if they were indifferent both to their own concerns and to the concerns of others. Those who avoid conflict tend to prefer apathy, isolation and withdrawal to facing conflicts. They tend towards letting fate solve problems

instead of trying to make things happen. When potential conflict situations arise the avoider might seek to distract attention from the issue, or ignore it completely. This response, depending on the conditions under which it takes place, can be seen either as evasive or as an effective and diplomatic avoidance strategy. Managers should use this style when the problem is less important, or when they assess the situation where nobody can satisfy their needs. Sometimes, conflict can be used for gathering information, letting others deal with the situation and avoid creating more problematic behavior and negative emotions.

*Collaborating* (problem solving) is both assertive and cooperative—the complete opposite of avoiding. Collaborating between two individuals might take the form of exploring a disagreement to learn from each other's insights, resolving some condition that would otherwise have them competing for resources. Collaborating involves an attempt to work with others to find some solution that fully satisfies their concerns. It means digging into an issue to pinpoint the underlying needs and wants of the two individuals. Collaborating between two persons might take the form of exploring a disagreement to learn from each other's insights or trying to find a creative solution to an interpersonal problem. People who have a collaborative orientation tend to be highly assertive and highly co-operative in behaviour. They seek a mutually beneficial solution, integration and win-win situations.

*Compromising* (sharing) is moderate in both assertiveness and cooperativeness. The objective is to find some expedient, mutually acceptable solution that partially satisfies both parties. It falls intermediate between competing and accommodating. Compromising gives up more than competing but less than accommodating. Likewise, it addresses an issue more directly than avoiding, but does not explore it in as much depth as collaborating. In some situations, compromising might mean splitting the difference between the two positions, exchanging concessions, or seeking a quick middle-ground solution. Compromising people are satisfied if people achieve moderate levels of satisfaction with agreements in conflict. Compromising people do not fully avoid the problem, nor do they fully collaborate to develop a win-win resolution. (Thomas, 1976).

Individuals can use one or more of the styles, however, most of us will feel more comfortable with one style than with others. It is the style(s) with which we feel most comfortable that we are likely to use most of the time.

### **3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The purpose of this paper is to explore the research question: Which conflict management style Macedonian managers use most frequently?

Based on the research problem and theory the following hypothesis is formulated:

We expected to find that Macedonian managers most frequently use compromising and collaborating as conflict management styles.

### **3.1. Sample**

The sample group consisted 180 managers, but because of incomplete data in the analysis 173 managers were included. The sample consisted 80 female managers (46,2%) and 93 male (53,8%) managers. In this sample group 41 managers (23,7%) were younger than 30 years old, 30 managers (20,2%) were between 31 and 40 years, 68 managers (39,3%) were between 41 and 50 years, and 29 managers (16,8%) were older than 51 years. Managers in this sample had different education: 49 (28,3%) had high school diploma, 101 (58,4%) had bachelor's degree, 22 (12,7%) had master's degree and 1 manager (0,6%) had Ph.D. The managers in the sample group were managing in private (79,8%) and public (20,2%) organizations. According to the size of the organization they are managing small organizations, with less than 50 employees (94 managers – 54,3%), middle organizations (41 managers– 23,7%) and large organizations (38 managers – 22%). According the level of the position they have, 88 managers (50,9%) were first line managers, 49 managers (28,3%) were middle managers and 36 managers (20,8%) were top managers. The managers from this sample group are different according the length of their managerial experience: 62 managers (35,8%) have less than 5 years managerial experience, 55 managers (31,8%) have between 5 and 10 years of experience, 29 managers (16,8%) have between 11 and 15 years of experience, 13 managers (7,5%) have between 16 and 20 years of experience, 9 managers (5,2%) have between 21 and 25 years of experience and 5 managers (2,9%) have more than 25 years of managerial experience.

### **3.2. Data collection**

An introductory email was sent to the sample population, explaining the study and inviting their participation. Following this introduction, we interviewed the participants in the study during the period September-November 2013.

### **3.3. Measurement of variables**

The research questionnaire consisted of two parts. The first part was drawn for collecting demographic information of managers, and the second part represented the main research questions. Demographic questions were about age, gender, education, working experience, type and size of organization and level of management.

#### *Conflict management styles*

The second part was Thomas-Kilmann conflict mode instrument (TKI), consisting of 30 forced two-choice questions. This instrument has been implemented in the majority of researches on conflict management. Twelve is the maximum score that can be devoted to each special conflict mode.

Participants answered each question by choosing either A or B which attributes their prevalent response to conflict.

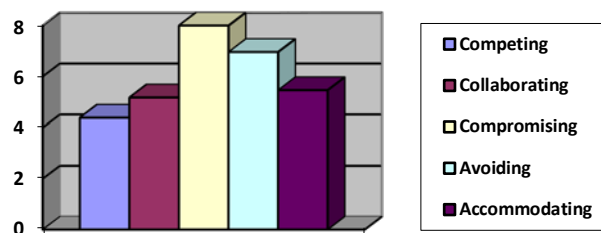
### 3.4. Data analysis and Hypothesis testing

The means, standard deviations and correlations among all the variables are presented in the following tables. In Table 1 are presented means and standard deviations of conflict management styles.

**Table 1:** Means and standard deviations of conflict management styles

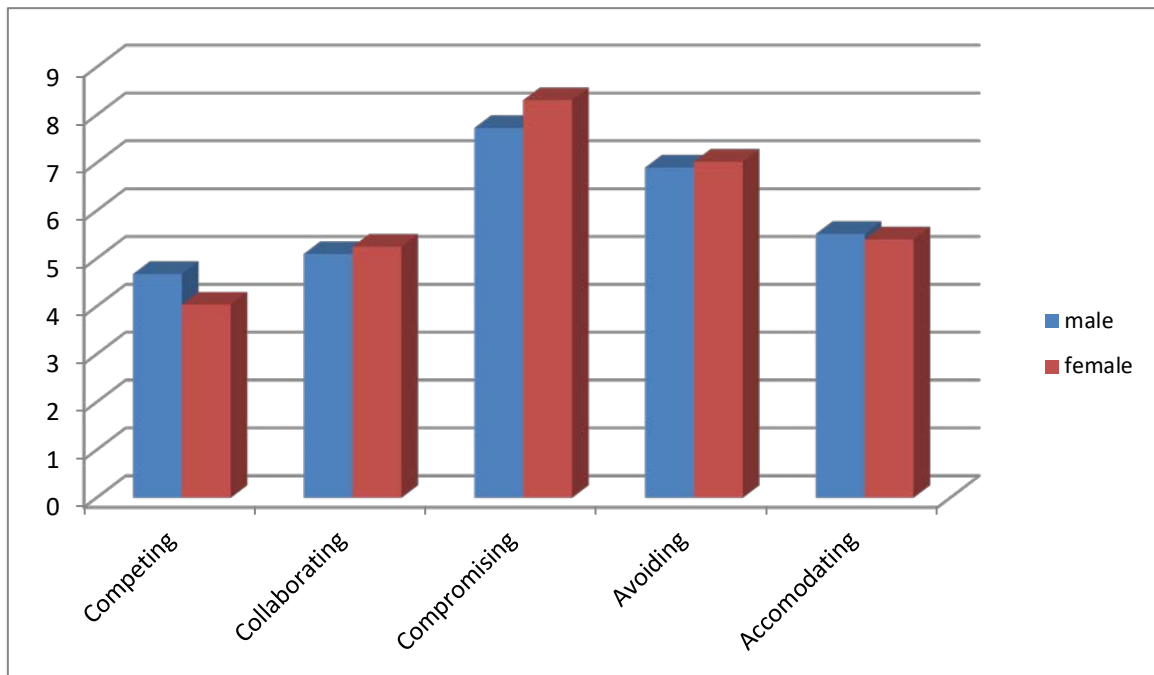
| Variable      | Min. | Max.  | Mean   | SD      |
|---------------|------|-------|--------|---------|
| Competing     | 0,00 | 12,00 | 4,3815 | 2,79828 |
| Collaborating | 2,00 | 11,00 | 5,1676 | 1,88652 |
| Compromising  | 1,00 | 12,00 | 8,0000 | 2,03744 |
| Avoiding      | 1,00 | 11,00 | 6,9595 | 1,84378 |
| Accommodating | 1,00 | 11,00 | 5,4624 | 1,94847 |

In Figure 2 can easily be seen that the most frequently used conflict management style among Macedonian managers is compromising, and the least frequently used conflict management style is competing.



**Figure 2:** Conflict management styles among Macedonian managers

In Figure 2 are presented the styles of handling conflict in relation to gender. The two predominant styles of handling conflict for both men and women are compromising and avoiding.



**Figure 3:** Styles of handling conflict in relation to gender

Based on the empirical analyses and obtained results, our researches prove the following:

- ✚ The most prevalent choice of conflict management style among Macedonian managers is compromising, followed by avoiding, accommodating and collaborating, respectively. Conversely, competing is the least common choice among Macedonian managers. We expected to find that Macedonian managers most frequently use compromising and collaborating as conflict management styles, which was confirmed by the results. Compromising is a give and take approach to conflict resolution which is likely to result in a solution of reduced effectiveness through dilution.
- ✚ We can say that this sample of Macedonian managers tend to adopt compromising style and wish to find mutually acceptable solution that satisfies both parties. This style is recommended when cooperation is important but time and other resources are limited. Very often in Macedonia, managers are facing situations when there are not enough resources and they have to manage with what they can use at the moment. This style enables managers to address an issue more directly than avoiding.
- ✚ The results show that the second preferred style is avoiding. This is uncooperative and unassertive style, which can lead to negative feelings, more problems and unresolved situations, as well as postponing the conflicts. Of the other approaches to resolving conflict identified by Thomas and Kilmann, competing is a strategy to win and not lose. There is no room here for listening to the views of the other party and developing a combined and better resolution of conflict.



- ✚ When Macedonian managers are in situations where the relationships are important for them, and they want to please others, instead fulfill their wishes and needs, they will use accommodating style. Managers using accommodating style yield their personal goals, objectives and desired outcomes to those of others. The accommodating style is most appropriate when managers realize that they are in the wrong or they are open to correction. This conflict management style is important for preserving future relations between the parties. Accommodation is a co-operative strategy, but is unassertive. It is a strategy of submission in which accommodators never get their views heard.
- ✚ The collaborating style is a win-win approach to problem solving, because this style is characterized by a high level of both assertiveness and cooperation. Collaboration offers the chance of consensus, integration of needs and the potential to yield optimal results. It brings new time, energy and ideas to resolve the dispute meaningfully. It is very much the prevailing belief in management thinking that, in the complex and fast-changing business world of the today, competitive advantage can be gained if the behavioral dynamic of organizations encourages collaboration. Collaboration is a strategy for resolving conflict that promotes assertiveness and co-operation. Assertiveness is important because it enables individuals to state their position openly. Co-operation is important because it promotes win/win solutions to conflict situations. We have the potential to develop new solutions to conflict situations by asserting our position and working towards better solutions by combining this with co-operation; adding value to each individual's or each group's preferred resolution. This style is rarely used by Macedonian managers and is something that should be considered enhancing. They should become more aware of the conflict management styles they use and hopefully start practicing more cooperative and more assertive styles which lead to win-win situations.
- ✚ The competing style, which is very rarely used by Macedonian managers, is a win-lose approach. It relies on an aggressive style of communication, low regard for future relationships and coercive power. Managers using this style tend to seek control over situation, because they are concerned that loss of control will result in solutions that fail to meet their needs. They should use this style in emergency situations or when their needs must come first or the issue is trivial.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

The Macedonian managers tends towards using compromising and avoiding styles most frequently, and competing is the style used less than the others. We can conclude that using this particular styles is part of the Macedonian culture of being cooperative and unassertive in situations in order to keep the peace and suppress own needs. Being „fair“ and process of „give and take“ is common for Macedonian managers.

### *Implications for future theory and research*

This theoretical and empirical research provided an initial examination of the conflict management styles among Macedonian managers. This research has sparked numerous additional questions to be addressed by future research. Research like this is rare in Macedonia, and it would be the best to replicate the same study on other managers to provide more data about Macedonian managers, and their conflict management styles. This research should be redone with larger number of participants and more expansive sample groups considering different organizations and level of management. Further surveys will probably enhance the organizations and the educational system to take bigger steps in educating the managers in these topics and create greater awareness on the topic of managerial styles and ways to right style in different situations and benefit the most. Also, further study is needed to monitor the practical conflict management in actual situations and examining the ways managers communicate and make decisions.

It is also suggested to explore the root causes of manager's different behavior at workplace. Next studies should also compare the conflict management styles Macedonian managers have with managers from all around the world, and find similarities and differences.

### *Implications for practice*

The implications of the findings presented in this study are also important for practice. Information that will help organizations and managers start discussing the topic of conflict management styles and become aware of the importance of these styles on their behavior in every day business life.

This research provides implications for practice in several areas: discussion on the subject, new approaches to question managers styles, best ways they can use the knowledge and implement it in their work, when creating teams and making decisions. With the awareness they can have better communication with other, learn from experience and tend to be more open-minded, cooperative and assertive, as way as finding out an applicative methods for measuring the undertaken changes in conflict management styles of managers.

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