

# **SUPERVISORS' CONFLICT RESOLUTION STRATEGIES: THE MISSING LINK BETWEEN CONFLICT TYPES AND EMPLOYEES' BEHAVIORS**

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*Received date: 25 February 2019; Accepted date: 23 April 2019*

**Abstract:** Conflict is inevitable in the workplace. Studies found conflicts in the workplace tend to contribute negative effects on employees' positive behaviors. However, conflict is not always bad, it depends on the conflict types and the conflict resolution strategies. In this conceptual paper, the missing picture of the relationship between conflicts, conflict resolution strategies, and employees' positive behaviors will be discussed. Understanding the relationship between these variables enables us to have a better knowledge of how the conflict affects employee behaviors. And, the knowledge will benefit industrial and organizational psychologist, workplace counselors and human resource manager.

**Keywords: Conflict Types, Conflict Resolution Strategies & Employees' Behavior**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Employees' positive behaviors (loyal toward the organization, organizational commitment, organizational citizenship behavior, etc.) are valuable assets for the organization. The positive behaviors can shield the organization from possible jeopardy. For many decades, researchers have been exploring various approaches to enhance employee positive behavior in the current challenging working environment. Conflicts that occur in the workplace tend to damage employee positive behavior (Wit, 2013)

especially in collectivist societies such as Taiwan, Korea, Indonesia, and Malaysia (Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005). Employees in collectivist societies value harmony in a group and avoid confrontations (Hofstede, 2001). They tend to maintain harmony and avoid conflict in the workplace (Komarraju, Dollinger, Lovell, 2008). However, conflicts are inevitable among humans. Conflicts are common experiences in any type of work environment which we regularly encounter. It is a natural outcome of human interaction, especially in the workplace.

### **Is Conflict Good or Bad in The Workplace?**

Conflicts exist when incompatibility, disagreement, or dissonance happens (Barbuto and Xu, 2006). Some studies found that conflict stimulates innovation, creativity (Rahim, 2011), improve problem-solving quality (Alper, Tjosvold, and Law 2000), and increase job performance (Chua and Choi, 2014), and organizational citizenship behavior (Nawaz and Gomas, 2018). Whereas some studies found that conflict leads to counterproductive workplace behavior (Penney & Spector, 2005), cause job stress, relationship damage, decrease organizational commitment, loyalty, (Rahim, 2011), job satisfaction (Hjerto and Kuvass, 2017) and organizational citizenship behavior (Moelle, 2016). One of the possible explanations for these is because there are three types of conflict in workplace namely task, relationship and process conflict as listed in table 1. And, different types of conflict contributed impact on employees' behavior differently (Behar, Mannix, Peterson and Trochim, 2011). Jehn and Mannix (2001) found that task conflict influence group performance more positively compared to relationship conflict and process conflict. Humphrey, Aime, Cushenbery, Hill, and Fairchild, in 2017 found task conflict-affected job performance positively. Whereas, O'Neil, Allen, and Hastings in 2013 found that process conflict-affected job performance negatively but no significant relationship was found between relationship conflict and job performance. Wit, Greer, and Jehn (2012) also found that compared to task conflict, relationship and process conflicts affected group performance more deeply. To shed more light on the relationship between conflict and employees' behaviors, all three types of conflicts have to be examined.

**Table 1: Three Types of Conflict**

<b>Conflict types</b>	<b>Description</b>
Task conflict	Conflicts or disagreements happen among employee related to a certain task. It happens when an employee has a different opinion about a certain task.
Relationship conflict	Interpersonal conflict among employees that happen in the workplace.
Process conflict	Conflict or disagreements about how work or task in the workplace should be accomplished. More specifically, process conflict pertains to issues of duty and resource delegation.

However, examine the impact of different types of conflict on employees' behaviours will not suffice. As researchers paid too much attention to examining the effects of conflicts on an organization but neglected to find out what to do when workplace conflicts emerge (DeDreu & Vianen, 2001). Liu (2008) pointed out that examining the nature of conflict without knowing the appropriate approaches to manage the conflict only solves half of the problem. The results appear that there are some discrepant findings in the relationship between conflict types and employee behaviour. In this regard, we summarise that there must be some missing link between the two variables (conflict types and employee behaviour).

Conflict is a double-edged sword for an organization. It can be beneficial or detrimental to an organization depending upon the management (Samantara and Sharma, 2016). In particular, it depends on how the supervisor handle the conflict (Kigali, 2006; Liu, 2008). Inappropriate supervisors' conflict resolution strategies will cause destructive conflicts and suppressed employees' organizational citizenship behaviour (Moeller, 2016) and increased employees' burnout tendency (Nelson, 2012). Whereas, if the supervisor can handle it well, the negative effects of the conflicts can be ameliorated (Todorova, Bear & Weingart, 2013). In other words, constructive or destructive conflict is mainly depending on how a supervisor handle the conflict.

### **Supervisor's Conflict Resolution Strategies**

Supervisors' conflict resolution strategies refer to the supervisors' conflict-handling strategies or patterns when encountering conflict in the workplace. According to Rahim (1983), conflict resolution strategies can be categorized into five divisions namely: integrating, obliging, compromising, avoiding, and, dominating.

- a) **Integrating Strategy** – Supervisor who employs this strategy highly values both himself/herself and his/her employees as illustrated in Figure 1. This strategy is also known as problem-solving. He/she views conflict as a problem to be solved, and solve the conflict via collaboration to reach a solution acceptable to both parties. This type of strategy is generally known as the best conflict resolution strategy in managing conflict under some circumstances (Verma, 1998) because it provides a long-term solution, although it might take a long time.
  
- b) **Obliging strategy** – The supervisor who uses this strategy has a low concern about himself/herself but is highly concerned for others (employees). When conflicts happen, he/she tends to focus on areas of agreement rather than areas of the difference until suppresses his/her needs, interests and goals. This strategy only provides a short-term solution and the price the supervisor needs to pay is too high. It is only applicable when a supervisor has a low negotiation status.
  
- c) **Compromising Strategy** – The supervisor who employs this strategy has intermediate concern for himself/herself and the employees. When conflict occurs, he/she will take a middle point, make a mutually acceptable decision and bargain to reach some degree of satisfaction for both parties. It involves give and take on both parties whereby both parties have to give up something to find the optimal solution in conflict. This strategy might be able to provide a definitive solution but not a long-term solution.
  
- d) **Avoiding Strategy** – The supervisor who employs this strategy has low concerns for himself/herself and his/her employees. When conflict happens, he/she is likely to not address the conflict at all

and being physically absent, avoiding issues and remaining silent. This strategy is considered the worst because it does not solve the conflict at all.

- e) **Dominating Strategy** - The supervisor who employs this strategy is highly concern about himself/herself, but lack concern for employees. When conflict occurs, he/she tends to use force and competitive strategies to obtain her or his objective without concern about others. This strategy is only advisable to use when the objective is clear. If a supervisor has a very clear goal to be achieved, then the dominating strategy is employable. If not, hard feelings may come back in other forms, thus decrease employee positive behaviours.

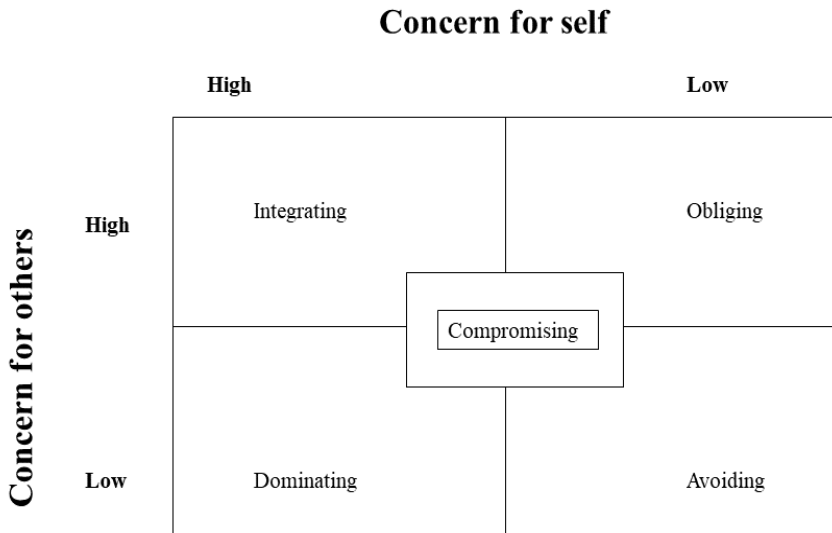


Figure. 1 The dual concern model of the conflict resolution strategies

Rahim, Magner & Shapiro, 2000 have divided the five conflict resolution strategies into two primary components, namely cooperative and uncooperative conflict resolution strategies. The three strategies (integrating, obliging and compromising) that have moderate to the high

level of concern for others are categorized as “cooperative conflict resolution strategies”. While dominating and avoiding are categorized into “uncooperative conflict resolution strategies”, both of these strategies shown little concern for others. The summary of conflict resolution strategies is shown in table 2.

Table 2: Five conflict resolution strategies

	<b>Conflict Management style</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Effect</b>
<b>Cooperative</b>	Integrating	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Value both himself/ herself and others.</li> <li>• Solve the conflict via collaboration.</li> <li>• Best conflict solution strategy.</li> </ul>	Provides long-term resolutions, but time consumers.
	Obliging	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low concern about himself/herself, but highly concern for others.</li> <li>• Accommodating until to satisfy his/her needs.</li> </ul>	This strategy only provides a short-term solution. Use only when your negotiation power is low.
	Compromising	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intermediate concern for himself/ herself and others.</li> <li>• Making a mutually acceptable decision involves give and take on both parties.</li> </ul>	Provide a definitive solution, but not a long-term solution.
<b>Uncooperative</b>	Avoiding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low concerns for himself/ herself and others.</li> <li>• Withdraw from conflict situations.</li> <li>• Worst conflict solution strategy.</li> </ul>	Does not solve the conflict.
	Dominating	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use forcing and competitive strategies to obtain her or his objective without concern about others.</li> </ul>	Hard feelings may come back in other forms.

The relationship between supervisors' conflict resolution strategies and employee behaviors can be explained through the reciprocity theory.

**Reciprocity Theory**

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Reciprocity theory is developed by Falk and Fischbacher in the year 2001. They believe that people are reciprocal in interpersonal relationships. People will react accordingly to how others treat them. People will evaluate others' actions based on their intentions before responding to the action. In other words, individual behavior depends on how they have been treated. The individual will return the kind action if they receive gentle treatment. Conversely, the individual will punish unkind behavior if they receive unkind treatment.

Based on reciprocity theory, we conjecture that an employee's behavior is a result of his/her supervisor's action. In other words, supervisors' conflict resolution strategies will affect employees' behavior. We surmise that if the supervisor applies uncooperative conflict resolution strategies (dominating or avoiding), such as the supervisor forces employee to obtain her or his objective without having concern about them or the supervisor avoid the conflict and remain silent in conflict situation causing employee to fail to receive fair treatment, consequently it will reducing employees' positive behavior.

On the other hand, if supervisors collaborate with employees and solve the conflicts mutually (Integrating conflict resolution strategy) or the supervisor and the employee make a mutually acceptable decision to reach some degree of satisfaction for both parties in conflict (Compromising conflict resolution strategy) or the supervisor give in to the employee although it will suppress his/her needs, interests and goals (Obliging conflict resolution strategy), they will make the employee feel he/she is valuable. In return, the employees' positive behaviors will be increased as illustrated in the following diagram 1.

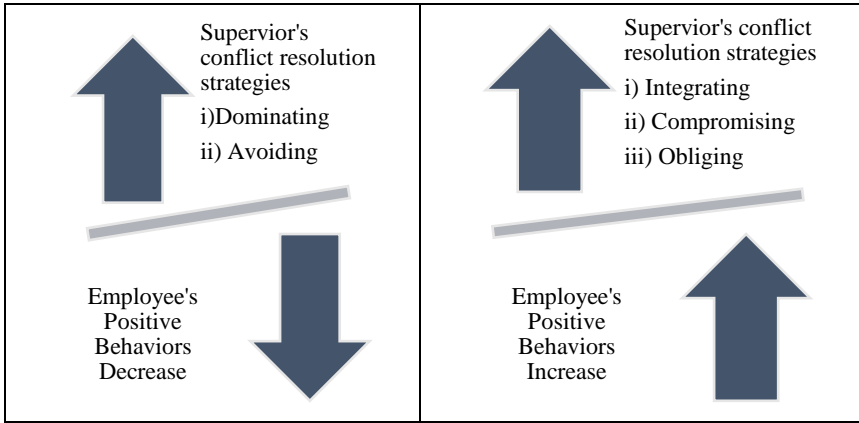


Diagram 1: The relationship between supervisors' conflict resolution strategies and employees' positive behaviours

In this regard, we posit that supervisors' conflict resolution strategies may be the potential moderators in minimizing or eliminating the negative impact of conflict on employees' behaviours as illustrated in diagram 1.

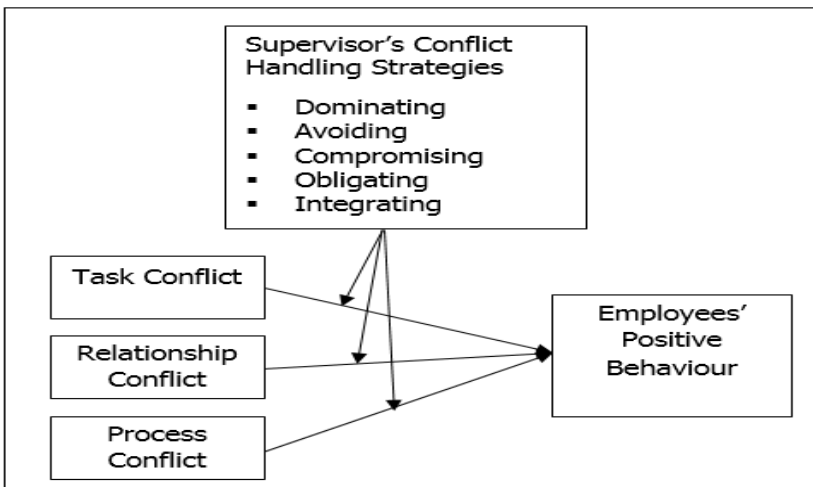


Diagram 2: The relationship between supervisors' conflict resolution strategies, conflict types and employees' positive behaviours.

Particularly, we hypothesis that:



- The negative effects of conflict on employees' positive behaviours can be ameliorated by (integrating, compromising and obligating) supervisor's conflict resolution strategies.
- The negative effects of conflict on employees' positive behaviours can be amplified by (dominating and avoiding) supervisor's conflict resolution strategies.

## **CONCLUSION**

Based on the above-mentioned research findings, it can be hypothesized that conflict resolution strategies will be able to explain the discrepant findings between conflict types and employee behavior.

In this regard, we conclude there is a need to examine how the supervisors' conflict resolution strategies moderate the relationship of conflict types and employee behavior as illustrated in diagram 2. By identifying the moderator, we will be able to minimize or eliminate the negative effects of conflicts on employees' positive behaviors thus increase employees' well-being and organization's performance.

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