

Conflicts Management through On-line Education among China's Universities During the COVID 2019

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doi: <https://doi.org/10.37745/bje.2013/vol11n4117>

Published March 18, 2023

Citation: Yuhan S., Jianguang S., Haratyan F. (2023) Conflicts Management through On-line Education among China's Universities During the COVID 2019, *British Journal of Education*, Vol.11, Issue 4, 1-17

ABSTRACT: *Conflicts are ubiquitous in many fields, including higher education. This present study is focused on a higher education institution with Chinese characteristics involved in the occurrence of conflicts every now and then. During the pandemic of COVID 2019, university authorities have taken strict countermeasure to prevent the epidemic from affecting campus life, but conflicts have occurred between the authorities and teachers, authorities and students, and students and teachers, to name a few. Referring to Thomas- Kilmann conflict model, this paper puts forward strategies for conflict management to members and leaders in higher education institutions in order to solve possible unexpected conflicts.*

KEYWORDS: conflict management; China's Higher Education Institutions; cases analysis; strategies

INTRODUCTION

During the pandemic of the of COVID 2019, China's government takes strict control measures to fight against the spread of the virus so as to accomplish the goal of dynamic zero. University as a people-crowded community, is the key control place; under the circumstances, conflicts appear to be unavoidable, especially in the case of online education.

Definitions of Conflict

Conflicts exist everywhere, which is the phenomenon of the natural and social development. The term of conflict can be defined as incompatibility of interest, needs, values, ideologies, goals, habits, power, status, resources and wills. When two or more social entities, such as individuals, groups, teams, organizations, and countries interact mutually in attaining their own goals, to a great extent, their relationships would become intense, incompatible, inconsistent, and even hostile. In Webster's Dictionary, conflict refers to "clash, competition or mutual interference of opposing or incompatible forces or qualities (as ideas, interest, wills)." Thompson (1998) argues that "conflict is the perception of differences of interests among people" (Thompson, 1998: 4). Some scholars believe that conflict is a process of social interaction involving a struggle over claims to resources, power and status, beliefs, and other preferences and desires. The aims of the parties in a conflict may extend from simply attempting to gain acceptance of a preference, or securing a resource advantage, to the extremes of injuring or eliminating opponents. (Bisno, 1988: 13-14; Coser, 1968: 232) More researches have been further done from diverse perspectives, including intrapersonal, interpersonal, intragroup, intergroup and societal. (Abdul Ghaffar & Umar Ali Khan, 2012; Deutsch, Morton, Coleman, Peter T. & Marcus, Eric C., 2006; Wilmot & Hocker, 2011)

Conflict Management

Conflict management involves finding solutions to limit the negative aspects of conflict and to increase the positive aspects of it. It is different from the conflict solution. Rahim (2001: 75) claims that "conflict resolution implies reduction, elimination, or termination of conflict." Studies on the specific methods to solve conflict include negotiation, bargaining, arbitration and mediation. Conflict management, then, is an art to balance the conflict and try to guide the conflict from negative aspects to the positive aspects. "It involves designing effective strategies to minimize the dysfunctions of conflict and enhancing the constructive functions of conflict in order to enhance learning and effectiveness of an organization" (Rahim, 2001: 76). It is an abstract theory exploration in which conflict managers need to apply sociology, psychology, physiology, culture, ecology, leadership, etc to deal with conflict. It aims to minimize the disadvantage, overcome blockage of conflict and constructively direct resistance to the advantageous aspect, which will make organizations unitary and harmonious and help members innovate and highly perform in their tasks.

Classification of Conflict Management

Organizational behavior will have great impact on organizational output. However, during this process, there are different conflicts from a variety of external and internal factors. Conflicts have become a normal part of any organization. So is the case with higher education institutions. From Burrell and Morgan's (1979) research, there are three main metaphors about the organizations from three perspectives. Morgan argues that the organization may be viewed as a mini-state with three potential sets of relationships between the individual and the organization: unitary, pluralist, and radical (Burrell & Morgan, 1979: 204-388).

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The unitary perspective of the organization stresses the achievement of common objectives. The organization is viewed as being united under the umbrella of common goals and striving toward their achievement in the manner of a well-integrated team. In this model of the organization, conflict is regarded as a rare and transient phenomenon that can be removed through appropriate managerial action. Where it arises is usually attributed to the activities of deviants and troublemakers.

The pluralist perspective of the organization emphasizes the diversity of individual and group interests. The organization is regarded as a loose coalition that has just a passing interest in the formal goals of the organization. Conflict is viewed as an inherent and ineradicable characteristic of organizational affairs and stresses its potentially positive or functional aspects.

The radical perspective of the organization focuses on the oppositional nature of contradictory 'class' interests. Organization is viewed as a battleground where rival forces (e.g. management and unions) strive for the achievement of largely incompatible ends. Organizational conflict is regarded as inevitable and as part of a wider class conflict that will eventually change the whole structure of society. It is recognized that conflict may be suppressed and thus often exists as a latent rather than a manifest characteristic of both organizations and society.

Research Questions

Many researches have focused on the conflicts and conflict managements occurring in the companies and other organizations. A few studies discuss the conflicts among students in the dormitory in the usual time, but the COVID-2019 breaks out in scattered cities which will increase the risk of outbreak of the pandemic in the universities, so the university authorities take strict countermeasures to defend it. Conflicts have occurred among the authorities, teachers, and students. Research questions in this study therefore revolve around: (1) Did the intrapersonal conflict occur during online education? What are the strategies to solve it? (2) Did the interpersonal conflict occur during online education? What are the strategies to solve it? (3) Did the intragroup conflict occur during online education? What are the strategies to solve it? (4) Did the intergroup conflict occur during online education? What are the strategies to solve it?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Development of Conflict Research

Since the outbreak of COVID-2019, the education patterns have experienced great changes. During the epidemic prevention and control period, universities start the model of "suspending offline classes with non-stopping teaching and learning". Given that students have lived on campus, online teaching has been an effective way since the regular epidemic prevention and control became a policy. Complaints or conflicts have inevitably occurred, so how to solve them needs careful consideration. Much attention has been paid to the conflicts themselves, such as the conception, development,

solutions etc. Traditionally, before mid- 1940s, conflict was thought of as the process during which others took some action that had a negative effect on the other parties' interest. Conflict is negative and should be avoided. People have negative attitude toward the conflict because it leads to decline in performance as the level of conflict increases. Conflict has closely been associated with violence, irrationality, and destruction. The response of the leaders to conflict in this view is to reduce, avoid, suppress or eliminate it. In the unitary perspective of the organization, there is a possibility that a domineering leader suppresses all conflicts and disagreement, and even kill all of them, or performs the task in a structural manner but does not try to improve how it works.

However, from late 1940s to 1970s, more and more researchers had more reasonable understanding about the conflict. They believed that conflict is a normal part of the life and any organizational activities. It has either a positive or a negative effect, depending on how the conflict is dealt with. This view maintains that conflict is acceptable and rationalized to exist, and there are potential benefits from conflict. It is reasonable for conflict to exist among any dynamic elements. From the pluralist perspective of the organization, the leaders accept the negative and positive effects of the conflict. They attempt to make conflict transform to the beneficial side.

The interactionist view assumes that conflict is necessary to increase performance. This view encourages leaders to maintain an appropriate level of conflict—enough to keep projects self-critical, viable, creative, and innovative. It is a healthy sign. If there is no conflict in a team, a group or an organization, it might be a sign of a problem. An organization without conflict might be suffering from the unhealthy unitary perspective of the organization. This view encourages conflict based on the belief that a harmonious, peaceful, tranquil, too-cooperative project organization is likely to become static, apathetic, stagnant, and unable to respond to change and innovation. From the radical perspective of the organization, leaders accept the conflicts, and their power is regarded as a key feature of the organization and reflections of power relations in society at large closely linked to the wider processes of social control, e.g. control of economic power, the legal system and education.

Characteristics of China's higher education institutions.

The concern with improving coexistence in higher education institutions is focused on the conflicts variable in different studies, aiming at understanding the conflicts as well as preventing or avoiding its occurrence. (Manesis, 2019: 781-799). Higher education institutions in China can be regarded as the mixture of the unitary and pluralist perspective of the organizations. It is determined by the China's political system and higher education institutions with their own characteristics. According to a circular released by the State in 2014, the system is a power matrix in which presidents and other administrative officials accept and implement decisions made by Party committees. It means that China's higher education institutions have to be characterized by unitary and pluralist perspectives of the organization. It will be beneficial for the higher education institutions to make decisions efficiently, organize effectively and concentrate on resources to accomplish large undertakings.

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President leadership system ensures that university management has more opportunities to carry out teaching and academic activities and daily management. The organization is viewed as a plurality of power holders drawing their power from a plurality of academic sources. To some extent, the university authority is the medium through which conflicts of interest are alleviated and resolved while they exert their administrative power on teaching, academic and daily management activities.

Research methods

The study analyzes different conflicts based on the cases which occurred in online education during the epidemic prevention and control period. These conflicts appeared among the university authority, teachers, students. Cases are introduced and analyzed, with a focus on the intrapersonal, interpersonal, intragroup, and intergroup conflicts.

Main forms of Conflicts in Higher Education Institutions and Causes

A university is a part of the society, and it serves as a sub-society. Conflict in higher education institutions is inescapable and complex. It can arise because of the different interests, goals, valuation, appropriation, relationship, and role. These conflicts could be latent or open, chronic or unexpected, structural or unstructured. There are intrapersonal, interpersonal, intragroup, and intergroup conflicts according to the conflict subjects. A university ecological conflict chart is accordingly built as in Figure 1.

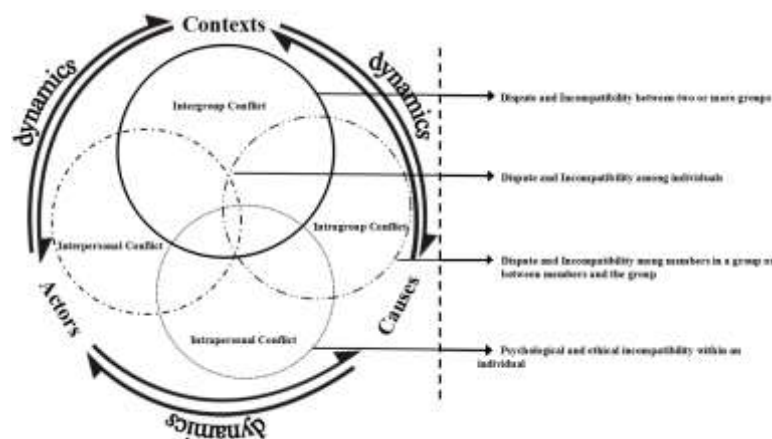


Figure 1: Integrated Levels of Conflict

The conflict occurs and develops anywhere and anytime, which is a dynamic process. In this dynamics, there are three factors affecting the conflict occurrence. Context refers to the environment conflict actors are situated in. It includes ecological, political, economic, and cultural background in which the intervention exists. It could be classified as external factors. Usually, conflicts happen in a certain context. External factors exert some influence on the actors, which will accumulate latent pre-conflict elements. Actors are subjects of the conflicts, including all persons or groups who are engaged in or affected by conflicts. They contribute to conflict or are affected by it in a positive or negative manner, as well as those engaged in dealing with conflicts.

Causes refer to the factors that contribute to conflict, which make individuals or groups in an unhappy condition. They can be divided into four parts: structural causes, proximate causes, human nature causes and triggers. **Structural causes** refer to the pervasive factors built into the policies, structures and fabric of a society, since these factors cannot meet all people or organizational needs. They could create pre-conditions for latent conflicts. These factors include law and rules, customs and habits, ethics and culture, and traditional ideology, etc. **Proximate causes** refer to the factors which could contribute to a climate conducive to conflict or its further escalation to violence. These factors include uncontrolled security sector, unfairness, human rights abuses, destabilizing role of neighboring countries, and so on. **Human nature causes** refer to factors which are conducive to conflict from human inner struggles, such as individual personality and character, disposition, belief, value, ideology, desire, interest, uncertainty, stress, hesitation, anxiety, depression and insomnia, etc. **Triggers** refer to certain behavior, acts, events, or their anticipation that will lead to or escalate conflict, such as defiance, election, failure, drought, flood, sudden collapse of local currency, rapid change in unemployment, increased price, scarcity of basic commodities, etc.

Intrapersonal conflict refers to the discord that occurs within an individual because of human nature. It is often studied by psychologists and personality theorists who are interested in the dynamics of personality and factors that predispose people to inner conflicts. Roloff (1987: 489) believes that this conflict “occurs when there is incompatibility or inconsistency among an individual’s cognitive elements [which] implies that a new cognitive element is at variance with a prior explanation or expectation. Thus intrapersonal conflict reflects a challenge to a person’s basis for prediction and control resulting in greater uncertainty”. Intrapersonal conflict includes interrole, intrarole, and person-role conflict. Role is a set of expectations from others. Persons who expect of someone are called role senders while the person who is expected and is focused on is called a role receiver. Interrole conflict can occur when a person is experiencing conflict due to competing demands in two roles. By playing the two roles, the person experiences interrole conflict. Intrarole conflict can occur when the persons receive contradictory expectations in the same role. Person-role conflict occurs when a person is expected to do certain things as a part of his/her role, which is against personal value system. In fact, many conflicts are aroused by the intrapersonal and internal bewilder and collision.

Case 1: *Feng, Male, 56, a university teacher with the Liberal Art doctorate, has been engaged in Chinese Literature teaching near thirty years. He felt bewildered when the university decided to have online class during the COVID 2019. He has been used to teaching in the classroom. He likes to discuss with students face to face. But the sudden teaching form disturbed him, and he was at a loss as to what to do. He knew nothing about the online live software. He was in the anxiety and bewilderment. He refused to learn how to use the software. He became neurotic and ill. Finally, he applied to stop his class.*

Obviously, Feng's behaviors reflect that he is a stereotyped person who refuses to learn new things. In his nature, he rejected new technology and felt anxious. As an old teacher, he encountered different mental problems from the technological forms. It is a mentally and physically exhausting profession. He was in anxiety and emotional fluctuations for a long time and faced with much more pressure than other teachers. Intrapersonal conflict is the source of the other conflicts. If one cannot deal with it well, other conflicts will be escalated. If we can transform the negative side of conflict to the positive side, it is helpful for one to overcome the intrapersonal conflicts.

Interpersonal conflict refers to the disputes that arise among individuals. This is the type of conflict we focus on when we discuss conflict in organizations. Kellermann (1996: 258) describes an interpersonal conflict as "a clash between two individuals who are unwilling or unable to fulfill the expectations of each other." Rahim (2001: 117) defines interpersonal conflict as "the manifestation of incompatibility, disagreement, or difference between two or more interacting individuals." As mentioned above, every individual has their own personality, knowledge, skills, character, background, and habit. When they work in a group or an organization, it is inevitable to have conflicts among them because of their own expectation and value-pursuit. In a university, there are different offices, divisions and departments with staff and teachers responsible for various jobs. Provided that they all have particular personalities, interpersonal conflicts arise unavoidably. At the university level, interpersonal conflicts include teacher-teacher conflict, teacher-staff conflict, teacher-supervisor conflict, student-student conflict, and teacher-student conflict. Conflicts are encountered because they view the problem from different perspectives or have different interests and outlooks on life. Here is a case of conflict between teachers and supervisors.

***Case 2:** It is normalized to have online class in the first several weeks every new semester in China. At the beginning of outbreak of the Covid 2019, most universities lacked experience of organizing online classes. Teachers are usually asked to have online class at home. But inappropriate events sometimes occurred. For example, some teachers wore pajamas to have class, and sometimes their kids appeared on camera. This gave students a negative impression. So the supervisors decided to ask the teachers to have online class in the classroom where they used to have their offline class. Some teachers did not understand the reason for the requirement from the university authority. They complained that why they should have online class in the classroom without the students because they did not see the difference between having online class in the classroom and that at home.*

Although most of the teachers followed the professional ethics, certain teachers might act inappropriately because they assumed that no one would supervise them. But when they had online class in the classroom, they were supervised by the university. Brackett et al. (2019) raised approaches to coping with interpersonal conflicts. They applied the RULER (Recognizing, Understanding, Labeling, Expressing, Regulating) to deal with the conflicts between teachers and their supervisors

Publication of the European Centre for Research Training and Development-UK in the above case (Brackett et al., 2019: 144-161). The conflict lies in the teachers' emphasis on their own interest and neglect of the university's and students' interest. The university hopes that the teachers can provide high-quality online class as they did in the traditional classroom. In online courses, students also expect their engagement with good-quality teaching and learning as they experienced in the traditional classroom. The supervisors therefore were required to give teachers feedback on some inappropriate teaching conditions to improve online teaching quality.

There are many other interpersonal conflicts happening in the universities every day because each party wants to pursue his own interest and profit based on his own opinion, outlook, values and stands. Wilmot and Hocker (2011: 11) define conflict as "a felt struggle between two or more interdependent individuals over perceived incompatible differences in beliefs, values, and goals, or over differences in desires for esteem, control, and connectedness". This definition brings together what was discussed and helps us better understand interpersonal conflicts.

Intragroup conflict refers to the incompatibility in regard to goal, task, allocation, promotion, or activities among members in a group or between members and the group. Although many scholars have done researches on group dynamics, relatively few scholars have conducted intragroup conflict in organizations. Smith and Berg (1987) and Van de Vliert (1990) pioneered studies on the phenomena of conflict within groups. Jarboe and Witteman (1996: 316) believe that "an intragroup problem exists whenever a group member perceives a difference between what is presently occurring between him or her and the group and what he or she desires to occur." This definition raises two key factors about intragroup conflicts. One is "a difference", and the other is "between him or her and the group", which means conflicts occur between people or between people and group itself. Rahim (2001:143) describes intragroup conflicts as "the incompatibility, incongruence, or disagreement among the members of a group or its subgroups regarding goals, functions, or activities of the group." His definition gives us a clear understanding of how they occur. When members of a group or its subgroups are involved in conflicts, intragroup conflict might arise. Under a university, there are at least two levels of sub-organization: Faculty and Department. In some universities, there two more levels of sub-organizations: Teaching and Research Section and Course group, along with Faculty and Department. There are also some temporary task groups, such as Mathematical Modeling Contest team, National College English Contest team, and other teams.

Case 3: *A university academic research team mainly undertakes basic applied academic research. Within the team, they carry out several research projects at same time. A researcher usually takes part in one research project while some core researchers are occasionally in charge of two related projects. One day, the team held an academic online meeting. Team leader A pointed out that there was a project II without any members to undertake because of limited resources. In the meeting, A asked all project chairpersons and members to give their own viewpoints about how to make up a new project team to do research on project II. At the beginning, no one voiced his/*

her opinion. When every project chairperson said that their tasks were heavily work loaded, the dispute in the meeting became increasing heated. Finally, a project chairperson D decided to undertake this new project. Selected researchers then participated in this project at the same time. Later on, D held the meeting to discuss the main tasks and allocation of the project II. Members were disputing over the allocation because of their current research on the undertaking projects. With long negotiation, the allocation plan was initiated. Conflicts on task allocation in the meeting because of different know-how and fields they specialized in. After many project team discussions, the basic tasks of project II were finally allocated on the basis of team members' fields of expertise. D decided to hold academic discussions regularly on the project II and suggested that all members actively learn more about the projects. Though there were some conflicts, most of them agreed with the decision.

There are two kinds of conflicts in this case: one is relation conflict; the other is task conflict. Relation conflict occurs because this is a new built team. D is a new chairperson of the project II, and other members were selected from other different project teams. They lacked communication and trust, which would affect team performance directly, including emotion of members, cohesion, satisfaction and research and development efficiency. Task conflict occurs because of different task perceptions and task implementation which could be addressed with immediate mediation and control.

Intragroup conflict exists now and then in general. There are usually two types of conflicts: interpersonal conflicts and member-group conflicts. The latter is the main intragroup conflict. It consists of conflict of individual goal and group goal, individual achievement and group achievement, individual personality and team spirit, the needs of individual competition and team coordination, and individual will and team decision-making. Conflict could be divided into value conflict, interest conflict and task conflict according to the elements (Shi, 2014: 89). In the process of intragroup conflict, four stages of non-conflict, false conflicts, latent conflict, and real conflict could be involved.

Members with different personalities, educational backgrounds, outlooks, values, goal pursuit, and working habits have different viewpoints when they work together. If they cannot communicate in time, conflict occurs inevitably, which will make them fail to trust and support each other. If there is interest conflict, leaders will deal with them properly to turn conflict from the negative side to the positive side. Proper conflict management will be beneficial to the group, and members will work hard for the same team goal and realize two-wins in their work.

Intergroup conflicts mean that incompatibility or difference between two or more groups because of their collective interests, resource allocation, prize and awards, status in an organization, and fairness from the supervisor organization, etc. Rahim (2001: 165) defines the intergroup conflict as “the collective incompatibility or disagreement between two or more divisions, departments, or subsystems in connection with tasks, resources, information, and so on.” The definition stresses the

conflicts between groups. Lawrence and Lorsch (1967a: 42) pointed out that “in complex organizations having differentiated subsystems with different goals, norms, and orientations, it appeared that intergroup conflict would be an inevitable part of organizational life.” In fact, intergroup conflict is indeed unavoidable in any complex organizations. In a university, we mentioned above that there are different levels of organizations. There are conflicts between faculties or faculty-administrative divisions. At the same time, there are conflicts between departments, department-administrative offices in a faculty, or conflicts between sub-groups. These conflicts cannot be ignored by the university authority and management, because if leadership cannot solve it well, they might be destructive to university development. Intergroup conflicts have a great effect on group members, which would in turn affect members’ initiative and innovation in their jobs.

Case 4: During online live class, the university authority rule requires the chairpersons of different departments to visit students’ dormitories. The university president, vice presidents, deans, directors, classmasters, counsellors visited students at different times. Students felt frustrated because they were visited many times a day. The students were reminded of keeping their rooms tidy, more physical exercises, not playing computer games, etc. They disliked being told what to do.

From the above case, we can learn that it is the typical intergroup conflict happening in the universities in China. Teachers should be concerned about their students as their parents. The university authority hopes that the students’ dormitories are in good order. For example, the dormitories are tidy, and students have good life habits. In this way, they will not be addicted to the computer games but learn more in their spare time.

These four conflicts are not isolated but interlocked. Higher education Institutions have organizational characteristics similar to those of other institutions, but they also has their particular characteristics. In higher education Institutions, besides the regular causes of conflicts, there are special reasons for conflicts. People cherish academic freedom and autonomy. They believe in academic freedom and “their job in research and teaching requires freedom of thought and opinion, individuality and plurality and adequate participation as well as representation, with only a few elements of hierarchy and external definition of objectives” (Selter, 2011: 94). This is an ideal academic climate, but in fact, in China’s higher education institutions involve hierarchy, power monopoly, and academic monopoly. Academic features reflect and favor dominance of individual interests, which may show signs of disregard for overarching needs and interests of the organization as a whole. Together with monopolies and other organizational disagreement, more complicated conflicts in higher education institutions may occur. On the other hand, academic organizational culture stresses competition itself. That is, the more successful the academic members are, the higher their reputation is, and the more resources they will possess. Administrators such as deans, chairpersons, and team leaders who lack experience in handling conflicts also could escalate the conflicts. These hard and soft factors of

Publication of the European Centre for Research Training and Development-UK reputation and resources will induce conflict covertly or overtly.

DISCUSSION

As discussed above, many sources could result in conflicts, including confusion about people's position, personality differences, legitimate differences of opinions, hidden desire, poor norms, competitive reward systems, and poorly managed conflict solutions. If any conflict is found early and dealt with properly, a further "automatic" escalation can be avoidable. Good leadership is associated with strong cognitive and artistic management strategies for conflicts. The subjects involved in conflict and conflicts management are leaders, members and organizations. People are core factors in all kinds of conflicts. More and more psychologists agree that conflict occurs when an individual or a group of individuals perceives differences and contradictions between or among members and groups because of interests, beliefs, desires or values that matter to them. (De Dre et al., 1999; Wall & Callister, 1995) Conflict management is a complicated process. Individuals, especially leaders as subjects must perceive the possible existence and forms of conflicts when they are in certain contexts, and what kind of impact of these conflicts will have on individuals and organizations. They could expect possible reasons for or sources of conflict and how they vary with the phases of different task cycles before taking any action. Then they must weigh up what solution will be taken to them. Finally, they get the outcome they expect (Figure 2). In an organization, presidents, deans, directors, chairpersons, or group managers must have enough intelligence and arts to deal with any unexpected conflicts.

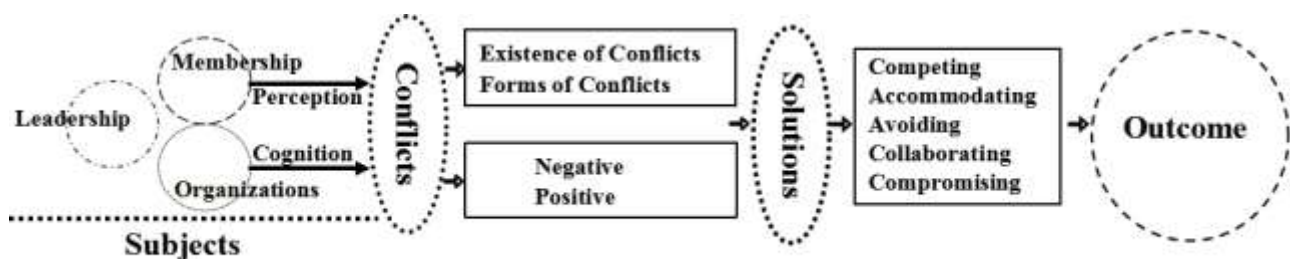


Figure 2: Strategies of Conflict Management

How subjects deal with conflicts is a central issue of organizational moral and ethical choice. When they deal with conflicts, they must make ethically correct decisions. Ideally, an organization's leadership is composed of the members who are most ethical and most capable of making wise decisions. When they confront with conflicts, they can solve them properly based on their ethical principles. It is fundamental for individuals and leaders to have healthy ethical standard in their mind. It paves the way for solving conflict in any context.

Different ways of handling conflict have different outcomes. One of the most widely recognized model of conflict management was developed by Kilmann and Thomas (1977) based on the work of

Blake and Mouton (1964). Kilmann and Thomas discussed the rationale and development of these five conflict-handling modes: competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding, and accommodating. These models could be used beyond interpersonal levels. Conflict is embedded in any context and situations, and the same strategies could be applied to all levels. They are correlated and interlocked. On this basis, the model describes conflict styles with two dimensions: assertiveness and cooperativeness. Assertiveness refers to attempts to satisfy one's own concerns, while cooperativeness represents attempts to satisfy the concerns of others. Each conflict style is characterized by how much assertiveness and how much cooperativeness an individual shows when confronting conflict. In higher education institutions, especially in China, there are academic pursuits, eccentric persons, bureaucrats, office politics players, comfort-zone underachiever and unenterprising persons. They compose a mixed pot of university conflicts. Conflicts vary, so do strategies of conflict management. We center on the five modes (Figure 3) to discuss the conflict handling strategies.



Figure 3: Five Conflict-handling Models

This model is adapted from "Conflict and Conflict Management" by Kenneth Thomas in *The Handbook of Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, edited by Marvin Dunnette (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1976). Another valuable contribution in this field is the work by Robert Blake and Jane Mouton in *The Managerial Grid* (Houston: Gulf Publishing, 1964, 1994).

Competing is a conflict style with which individuals or groups are highly assertive to pursue their own concerns at the cost of others' interest. It is essentially a win-lose conflict strategy, which means Zero-sum. This conflict approach could be used in the context where one competes with others on a difficult task. For example, two teachers compete for the first prize in a teaching contest. There is

potential conflict between them. They will stand up for their own rights and make their efforts to beat the opponent because there could only be a champion. In this situation, competition might stimulate creativity and enhance performance. If two parties have healthy awareness of the meaning of the first prize, they turn conflict into motivation, which will be beneficial to both. They could improve their teaching performance together. On the contrary, improper understanding of competition often results in creating unstable situations and hostile communication. As a result, individuals in competition will fail to recognize the concerns and needs of others. When one only pursues his own interest but ignores others' concern, he will breach the fundamental ethical principle— nonmaleficence. Therefore, this strategy should be used carefully.

Accommodating is a conflict style with which individuals or groups neglect their own concerns to satisfy others' interest. It is unassertive to one's own but cooperative to others— the complete opposite of competing. It is a lose-win conflict strategy. One accedes to the other party's stance or request in order to maintain harmony. For example, when members were discussing a teaching program, everyone had their own idea, but no agreement was reached. Especially two teachers had opposite ideas about it. They argued fiercely. At last, one decided to yield to the other's point of view. Obviously, the ultimate goal was to make a teaching program. Though there was disagreement between two members, there was no conflict of interest between them. One acceded, and the program could be implemented smoothly. This model easily make one move away from the uncomfortable feelings which might cause conflict. It is productive when the two parties keep harmonious relationships, and the task is accomplished. It is beneficial to individuals and groups. However, since it is a lose-win strategy, the accommodator will sacrifice his or her own values and a possible higher-quality decision in order to keep smooth relationships. This model could be applied to the relationship-based situation, but it is not suitable for the task-based situation.

Avoiding is a conflict style with which individuals or groups pursue neither their own concern nor others'. It is an unassertive and uncooperative conflict handling style. Avoiders tend to be passive and ignore conflict situations rather than confront them directly. They adopt a sidestepping attitude toward a conflict or withdraw from the situation. This model could be applied to the case that a conflict is of trivial importance or the potential damage from conflict would be too great. For example, two students are quarreling over a dormitory cleaning schedule. They have been arguing for over 20 minutes. If they continue to quarrel, they will have fierce conflict. One student decides to stop arguing and goes out to calm down under a tree. Avoidance can also provide a cooling-off period to allow participants to determine how to best resolve the conflict at a later time. However, big conflict cannot be avoided in the long term. Avoidance is a temporary expedient. Finally, they must find a way to solve the potential conflict.

Collaborating is a conflict style with which individuals and groups make an attempt to work with others to find some solution that fully satisfies their concerns. It is both assertive and cooperative—

the complete opposite of avoiding. It is a win-win model and an ideal conflict handling style because two parties recognize the inevitability of human conflict. They work cooperatively to explore a disagreement to learn from each other's standpoints to find a creative solution to an interpersonal problem and produce constructive outcomes. This model promotes relationship and teamwork and can satisfy two parties' concerns. However, collaborating is the most difficult style to achieve. It needs energy, patience and hard work among participants as well as shared control. They must identify differences of individuals and try to turn differences into agreements and get mutually satisfactory results. For example, in an academic project team, members have different expertise in their own fields, so they must learn to exert their strengths, become interdependent, and gain synergy. It is more cost-effective in the long run. Collaborating means digging into an issue to pinpoint the underlying needs and wants of individuals to reach a positive settlement to the conflict without sacrificing or suppressing anyone's concerns.

Compromising is a conflict model with which individuals or groups find an expedient, mutually acceptable solution that partially satisfies both parties. It is moderate in both assertiveness and cooperativeness. As Figure 4 indicates, compromising occurs halfway between competition and accommodation and involves both a degree of assertiveness and a degree of cooperativeness. It also occurs midway between avoiding and collaborating. It means that compromisers are concerned about others as well as their own needs. They also do not completely ignore confrontations, neither do they struggle with problems to the fullest degree. This conflict handling style is often chosen because it is expedient in finding middle ground while partially satisfying the concerns of both parties. For example, Pat wants to go on a camping vacation on Saturday, while John wants to visit the city museum. In the end, they decide to go shopping and see a film in the evening. Compromising is a positive conflict handling style, which split the difference between two parties, exchange concessions, or seek a quick middle-ground solution. Compromising tends to work best when other conflict styles fail or are not suitable to resolve the conflict. In order to reach agreement, conflicting parties often do not fully express their own demands, personal thoughts, and feelings. Innovative solutions are sacrificed in favor of a quick resolution, and the need for harmony supersedes the need to find optimal solutions to conflict. The result is that neither side is completely satisfied.

The five styles of conflict handling can be observed in various conflict situations. Although there are advantages and disadvantages for each style, the conflict-handling style that meets the needs of the participants while fitting the demands of the situation will be the most effective in resolving conflict. Participants, including presidents, deans, chairpersons, common staff and students, will be aware of all forms of conflict and adopt proper conflict handling styles according to certain situations. With their sensitivity and intelligence, they could choose corresponding strategies to solve conflicts occurring in their contexts.

CONCLUSION

Major contributions

Regular conflicts and special conflicts exist everywhere and anytime. From internal conflicts of students, staff, chairpersons, deans, and presidents to external conflicts of university and community, industries, and other non-government organizations, participants must deal with unexpected conflicts. Kilmann and Thomas's Conflict Model gives us strategic solutions to the conflicts. The detailed analysis of these five modes with examples shows the strengths and weaknesses of each style, which will instruct participants to weigh up situations and choose proper strategies to approach conflicts. As Runde and Flanagan (2007: 46) commented, "none of the styles is right or wrong, but the differences among them can cause misunderstandings about what other people are doing and why they are approaching conflict so differently. Knowing more about the different styles and how others perceive them can help you maintain your balance when dealing with someone who has a different style."

Limitations

Conflicts occurring during online education could be variable. Although the conflicts could be solved with the Kilmann and Thomas's conflict model, complicated conflict dynamics suggests conflict needs to be solved creatively. If participants could be conscious of the nature of conflict and have an understanding of conflict, they could adjust their emotion, mentality, and apply exact strategies in response to a certain context. Some participants, however, lack the cognitive ability to face conflict. The leaders must be expert in seizing the initiative to reduce the possibility of conflict occurrence. In some situations, their role could not be understated and ignored. On occasions, they are much more sensitive to conflict than ordinary staff. This study suggests that presidents of higher education institutions can have a training program for all deans, chairpersons, office managers and other team-leaders because it is necessary to improve their theories and skills of conflict management.

Inspirations

Traditional Chinese culture must be strengthened since it contains much rich philosophical thought. This thought could be learned from works of Confucius, Lao-tzu, Chuang-tzu, Mencius and other philosophers. In today's China, core socialist values are extracted and refined from ancient philosophers and Chinese modern social development theories, which are divided into three levels of state, society and citizen. They are prosperity, democracy, civility and harmony at the state level; freedom, equality, justice and rule of law at the societal level; and patriotism, dedication, integrity, and friendship at the civil level. Many of the core values such as democracy, civility, harmony, equality, justice, rule of law, and friendship are directly connected with conflict management, so they are good guidance for participants to solve conflict.

In China, higher education institutions have much more effective executive power, they can use their authority to solve some challenging and demanding tasks and marginalize conflicts. They could ask all staff and students to discard any resentment and individual interests under consideration of the overall interests. Pan democracy in the academia will breed contradictions, and so-called academic freedom will be out of control and get lost. China's higher education institutions with the unitary and pluralist perspectives of the organization will better balance collectivism and individualism.

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