Relationship between Emotional Intelligence and Conflict Management: An Empirical Study in India

Tanu Sharma*

Introduction
Emotional Intelligence (EI) has become a popular topic in the field of management since the publication of Goleman’s (1995) best-seller book on the topic. It has been acclaimed as the best predictor of work and life success (Goleman, 1995; 1998). Goleman defines EQ [why EQ and not 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” (Goleman, 1998, p.317). Many claims have been made by a great number of scholars about the potential of EI to predict work outcomes, such as job satisfaction, turnover (Goleman, 1998), and performance (Bachman, Stein, Campbell, & Sitarenios, 2000).

For example, publishers of EI tests advocate their use for personnel selection purposes, claiming that research has demonstrated a strong correlation between EI and job performance (Multi-Health Systems, 2001). Goleman (1998) also claimed that employees who are high in EI are “star performers.” These claims, however, have been strongly criticized as being implausible and lacking empirical support (Barrett, Miguel, Tan, & Hurd, 2001; Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2000a). Critics argue that many of these claims are made on the basis of unpublished studies, anecdotal accounts, and misinterpreted data (Barrett et al., 2001; Jordan et al., 2001).

According to Goleman (1999,p.95), there are five components of EQ at work. Self-Awareness (SA) refers to the ability to recognize and understand one’s own moods, emotions, and drives, as well as their effect on others. Self-Regulation (SR) refers to the ability to control or redirect one’s disruptive impulses and moods. Motivation (MO) refers to a passion to work for reasons that go beyond money or status. Empathy (EM) refers to the ability to understand the emotional framework of others. Social Skill (SS) refers to proficiency in managing relationships and building networks.

*Department of Humanities and Social Science, Jaypee University of Information TechnologyWaknaghat, Solan
The growth in interest in EQ is associated with increasing organizational change and organizational contextual volatility (Downing, 1997). Organizational change is frequently associated with emotional conflict or interpretative conflict (Downing, 1997). According to Rahim (2001; 1985; 1986), it is important to be aware of the style employees use to handle conflicts. The term conflict has been employed in different ways reflecting the different levels at which various conflicts exist (Deutsch 1990; Thomas 1992a). Thomas (1992a) noted two broad uses of the term. The first 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 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; hence, the terms interpersonal, inter-group, inter-organizational, and international [?] conflict. In a synthesis of the numerous conceptualizations and definitions of conflict, Putnam and Poole (1987) and Thomas (1992a, 1992b) identified three general themes or properties: interdependence, disagreement, and interference. Interdependence exists when each party's attainment of their goals depends, at least in part, on the actions of the other party. Without Interdependence, the actions of each party have no impact on the outcomes of the other party. In essence, interdependence represents a key structural pre-condition of any conflict situation, providing an interpersonal context in which conflicts may arise. However, while many individuals or groups are in interdependent relations with others, not all will experience conflict. Thus, interdependence is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for conflicts to occur. Disagreement exists when parties think that a divergence of values, needs, interests, opinions, goals, or objectives exists. As such, disagreement represents the key cognitive component of interpersonal conflict. Again, however, disagreement is not, by itself, sufficient for conflict to emerge. Disagreeing parties will not experience conflict when, for example, the areas of disagreement are irrelevant or unimportant (e.g., when there is no interdependence, or when the areas of disagreement are minor). Interference exists when one or more of the parties interferes with or opposes the other party's attainment of its interests, objectives, or goals. Interference thus represents the central behavioral characteristic of any conflict. Indeed, 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 (Wall and Callister 1995). Researchers have also shown the importance of incorporating negative emotion into conceptualizations of conflict, reflecting such feelings as jealousy, anger, anxiety, or frustration (Amason 1996; Jehn 1995; Pinkley 1990; Pondy 1967; Thomas 1992a, 1992b). These emotions are thought to emerge when there are major disagreements, or when parties interfere with the attainment of each others' important goals. Thus, a fourth property, negative emotion, can also be added. Here, we focus on this second use, and in particular, on interpersonal conflict which has been defined in many different ways (Thomas 1992a; Wall and Callister 1995).

Within the conflict domain, considerable effort has been expended to examine the management and resolution of conflicts, identifying a number of conflict management styles and their role in achieving satisfactory outcomes (cf., Blake and Mouton 1964; Pruitt and Rubin 1986; Putnam and Poole 1987; Thomas 1976, 1992b; Wall and Callister 1995). Several measures assessing styles of conflict management have also been developed (e.g., Kilmann and Thomas 1977; Putnam and Wilson 1982; Rahim 1983). Traditionally, researchers have identified five different modes or styles of conflict management behavior, often labeled as: asserting, accommodating, compromising, problem-solving, and avoiding. These styles are seen as general strategies or behavioral orientations that individuals adopt when dealing with conflicts.

**Asserting style** (also described as competing, controlling, distributive or contending style) occurs as individuals strive to win or prevail. Conflict is seen as a fixed pie, zero sum situation, with one party's gains coming at the expense of the others' (in the case of goal conflicts), or with one party's accuracy or correctness occurring as others are found to be inaccurate or are incorrect (in the case of judgment or decision conflicts). Conflict, therefore, is considered a win-lose situation. Alternative labels for this style include competing, dominating, and forcing.

Like asserting, **accommodating style** (also described as obliging style, non confrontation, yielding, or lose-win style) also views conflict as a fixed pie, zero sum situation and occurs when individuals sacrifice their own needs and desires in order to satisfy those of other parties. This occurs as individuals oblige or yield to others' positions, or cooperate in an attempt to smooth over conflicts. Alternative labels for this style include cooperating, obliging, yielding, and sacrificing.

**Compromising** is a third style (also described as mixed motive in game theory) that views conflict as a fixed pie, zero sum situation. However, compromising frequently splits the
difference or involves give and take behaviors where each party wins some and loses some. Alternative labels include sharing and splitting the difference.

**Problem-solving style** (also described integrating style, collaborative, cooperation, solution-oriented and win-win or positive sum style) occurs when individuals in conflict try to fully satisfy the concerns of all parties. Here, conflict is not seen as a fixed pie, zero sum situations, as was the case for the first three styles. Instead, actions are aimed at expanding the pie so that all parties can achieve their goals and objectives. Similarly, judgments and decisions are not seen as right or wrong. Instead, a synthesis is sought, integrating all parties' perspectives. Hence, it results as a win-win solution. Alternative labels of this style include integrating, cooperating, and collaborating.

Finally, **avoiding style** (inaction, withdrawal, or ignoring style) occurs when individuals are indifferent to the concerns of either party and refuse to act or participate in conflict. Here, one withdraws, physically or psychologically, abdicating all responsibility for the solution. Alternative labels for this style include withdrawing, evading, escaping, and apathy.

Literature indicates that cooperative styles are positively associated with constructive conflict management and with individual and organizational outcomes (Rahim and Magner, 1995). Cooperative conflict management styles, including problem solving, accommodating and compromising, show substantial concern for the other party. Among the three, integrative style is generally perceived as the most appropriate, most effective, and highly competent style in managing conflicts (Gross and Guerrero, 2000; Papa and Canary, 1995). Based on their empirical study, Weider-Hatfield and Hatfield (1995) found problem-solving positively related to interpersonal outcomes. Burke (1970) suggested that, in general, a confrontation (integrating) style was related to the effective management of conflict, while forcing dominating and withdrawing (avoiding) were related to the infective management of conflict. Lawrence and Lorsch (1967) indicated that a confrontation style dealing with intergroup conflict was used to a significantly greater degree in higher than lower performing organizations.

Scholars believe that an individual’s EQ influences one’s way of handling interpersonal conflict. Individual’s with high EQ may be more effective in resolving conflict than those with low EQ (Goleman, 1998; Mayer et al., 1997). Likewise, Jordon and Troth’s (2002) study showed that individuals with high EQ prefer to seek cooperative solutions when confronted with conflict.
Goleman (1998) suggests that emotionally intelligent employees are better able to negotiate and effectively handle their conflicts with organizational members. As discussed above, a growing number of scholars suggest that emotional intelligence (EI) plays an important role in managing interpersonal conflicts (e.g., Rahim, 2001). However, there is little empirical data on relationships between EQ and styles of handling interpersonal conflicts conducted in an Indian organisational context. To fill the gap, the present study is to explore the relationship between Emotional Intelligence and conflict management styles as conceptualized by Kilmann and Thomas (1977), Putnam and Wilson (1982) and Rahim (1983). It is expected that the present study will help to generate knowledge on EQ to improve conflict management in the Indian context.

Method

Objectives of the study

In the present study the investigator has considered two variables of interest namely “emotional intelligence and conflict management.”

The objective of the study was to explore the relationship between emotional intelligence and conflict management and to compare subjects having high level of EI and low level of EI on Conflict management style.

Hypotheses

In this study following statistical null versus alternative hypotheses were investigated:

1. **Null Hypothesis** ($H_0$): There is no significant relationship between emotional intelligence and problem-solving style of conflict management.
   
   **Alternative Hypothesis**: There is significant relationship between emotional intelligence and problem-solving style of conflict management.

2. **Null Hypothesis** ($H_0$): There is no significant relationship between emotional intelligence and asserting style of conflict management.
   
   **Alternative Hypothesis**: There is significant relationship between emotional intelligence and asserting style of conflict management.

3. **Null Hypothesis** ($H_0$): There is no significant relationship between emotional intelligence and avoiding style of conflict management.
**Alternative Hypothesis:** There is significant relationship between emotional intelligence and avoiding style of conflict management.

4. **Null Hypothesis (H₀):** There is no significant relationship between emotional intelligence and compromising style of conflict management.
   
   **Alternative Hypothesis:** There is significant relationship between emotional intelligence and compromising style of conflict management.

5. **Null Hypothesis (H₀):** There is no significant relationship between emotional intelligence and accommodating style of conflict management.
   
   **Alternative Hypothesis:** There is significant relationship between emotional intelligence and accommodating style of conflict management.

6. **Null Hypothesis (H₀):** There is no significant difference between groups having high level of emotional intelligence and low level of emotional intelligence in using conflict management styles.
   
   **Alternative Hypothesis:** There is significant difference between groups having high level of emotional intelligence and low level of emotional intelligence in using conflict management styles.

**Population and Sample**
A total of 1125 managers working at different levels of organizational hierarchy made the sample of the study. The organizations were chosen based upon their location and sector. All managers present for work were required to appear and fill their responses in questionnaire provided to them.

**Instrumentation**
The indicator of emotional intelligence that was used in this study was the *Emotional Competence Inventory* (ECI) (Boyatzis et al., 1999). 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. The higher the score, the 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 and dividing by the number of valid responses.

In addition to the ECI, a questionnaire measuring Interpersonal Conflict and Conflict Management Styles was used. Interpersonal conflict was defined as a phenomenon that occurs between interdependent parties when they experience negative emotional reactions to perceived disagreements and interference concerning the parties' goals. Given the lack of reliable and validated measures of interpersonal conflict, items were developed to assess each of the four definitional properties: interdependence, disagreement and interference [what is the fourth property?]. Twenty items, adapted from previous measures (Kilmann and Thomas 1977; Rahim 1983), were used to assess the extent to which students employed five styles (problem-solving, asserting, avoiding, compromising, and accommodating). 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. As such, relationships between interpersonal conflicts (reflecting the interdependence, disagreement, interference, and negative emotions of all participants in the project) and conflict management styles (again reflecting the behavioral styles of all project participants) can be investigated. The style items assessed these behaviors on 7-point scales ranging from 1 (never) to 7 (always).

Results

Correlations analysis results
The Pearson product-moment correlations and associated significance (Hays, 1963) between the subscales of the two constructs were explored in order to investigate the nature and significance of the relationship between EI skills and Conflict Management Styles. Pearson’s product-moment correlation is a measure of association, which varies from minus one to plus one, with zero indicating no linear relationship (random pairing of values); one indicating a perfect positive linear relationship, and the value of minus one indicating a perfect negative linear relationship.
Results of correlations of EI subscales with the styles of conflict management

Table 1: Correlation between the Emotional Intelligence sub-scales and Conflict Management styles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables ↓→</th>
<th>Problem Solving</th>
<th>Asserting</th>
<th>Avoiding</th>
<th>Compromising</th>
<th>Accommodating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Intelligence</td>
<td><strong>0.309</strong></td>
<td><strong>0.374</strong></td>
<td>-0.037</td>
<td><strong>0.283</strong></td>
<td><strong>0.238</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self Awareness</td>
<td>0.095</td>
<td>0.128*</td>
<td>0.069</td>
<td><strong>0.173</strong></td>
<td>0.044</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self Management</td>
<td><strong>0.294</strong></td>
<td><strong>0.305</strong></td>
<td>-0.041</td>
<td><strong>0.233</strong></td>
<td><strong>0.250</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Awareness</td>
<td><strong>0.375</strong></td>
<td><strong>0.407</strong></td>
<td>-0.060</td>
<td><strong>0.257</strong></td>
<td><strong>0.263</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Skills</td>
<td><strong>0.232</strong></td>
<td><strong>0.341</strong></td>
<td>-0.068</td>
<td><strong>0.231</strong></td>
<td>0.190**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

Table-31 shows the correlations between EI skills and different styles of conflict management. **Self awareness** is significantly correlated 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** is significantly and positively correlated 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.

The results indicate that the person who is high on the EI skills doesn’t avoid the conflict but tried to restore it. Therefore, alternative hypothesis nos. 1, 2, 4 and 5 are accepted because emotional intelligence have significant relationship with problem-solving, asserting, compromising and accommodating styles of conflict management. In case of avoiding style of conflict management null hypothesis is accepted because there is no significant relationship between emotional intelligence and of avoiding style of conflict management.

### Table 3: ‘t’ ratio of students having high EI Skills and low EI skills on Conflict Management styles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conflict Management Styles</th>
<th>High EI Skills</th>
<th>Low EI Skills</th>
<th>‘t’ ratio</th>
<th>Significance level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>S.D.</td>
<td>SEM</td>
<td>Mean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Problem Solving</td>
<td>22.07</td>
<td>3.84</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>18.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Asserting</td>
<td>21.02</td>
<td>3.74</td>
<td>0.45</td>
<td>16.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Avoiding</td>
<td>13.47</td>
<td>5.66</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td>13.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Compromising</td>
<td>20.40</td>
<td>4.26</td>
<td>0.52</td>
<td>17.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Accommodating</td>
<td>18.44</td>
<td>4.43</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>16.40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In order to compare participants having high EI skills and participants having low EI skills with respect to styles of conflict management, a sample of 27% high scoring and 27% low scoring managers in the respective categories was obtained by applying Kelley’s (1939) criterion of top 27% and bottom 27%.

Both groups differ significantly on all the styles of conflict management except avoiding style of conflict management. It indicates that participants with high EI skill are better in handling conflicts. The alternative hypothesis 6 is accepted.

**Discussion**

In the present study, we examined the reliabilities of the five dimensions of EQ and five styles of handling conflict with supervisors. Reliability simply means that a set of latent construct indicators is consistent in their measurement (Hair et al., 1992). According to DeVellis (1991, p.85), a Cronbach alpha value of below 0.60 is unacceptable; between 0.60 and 0.65, undesirable; between 0.65 and 0.70, minimally acceptable; between 0.70 and 0.80, respectable; and between 0.80 and 0.90, very good. However, some suggest higher standards. Nunnally (1978), for example, recommended a minimum standard of 0.70 for internal consistency. The statistical results of the present study indicate that the alpha values for five dimensions of EQ are very good. However, the alpha values for the five conflict management styles are not as good as those of EQ: (ranging from 0.66 to 0.75).

The relationship between emotional intelligence and conflict management styles is the focus of the present study. The literature suggests that high level of EI will be associated with cooperative solutions, which will result in more effective conflict management. The results of correlations provided mixed support for the hypotheses. 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 (1995), empathy involves understanding others, developing others, and having a service orientation. It implies that the more a supervisor understands his or her subordinates, the more likely he or she will use the problem solving style to handle conflict.
It is surprising that the EI was positively correlated asserting dominating style of handling conflict. Asserting style maximizes one’s own needs at the expense of the other individuals’ needs (Spitzberg et al., 1994). A further investigation 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 (Rahim et al., 2000).

Managerial implications

The privatization of the workplace will lead to increasing organizational change and organizational contextual volatility, which, in turn, will produce increasing differences and conflicts (Dana and Dana, 2003; Sommer, 2003). Therefore, the findings of this study have some importance to Indian organizations in managing conflicts.

The problem-solving style is generally perceived to be a more appropriate, more effective, and more competent style in managing conflict. The results of the study show that self-regulation and empathy explain a significant amount of unique variance in problem-solving styles.

Self-regulation is an important component of social development in that it contributes to the quality of interpersonal relationships (Saarni, 1999). Empathy involves understanding others, developing others, and having a service orientation (Goleman, 1995). Self-regulation and empathy can be developed (Davis, 1983; Kestenbaum et al., 1989). If managers want to be effective at managing conflict, then it becomes necessary for them to espouse and develop an integrative style. And organizations will have to consciously and continuously strive to inculcate self-regulation and empathy among their managers through an effective programme of training and development.

Limitations and future directions

This study is exploratory in its examination of 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.

In this study, there was a potential for common method bias, since both the dependent measures and independent measures were from the same respondents. Therefore, future studies should pay more attention to overcoming the problem of common method variance. 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 EQ and conflict management styles based on the Indian context.

References


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pp. 651-717.


