

A Research of Cross-Cultural Conflicts Causes and Management Implications

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Abstract: *In the world of accelerating globalization, managers have to deal with subordinates and coworkers from different cultural backgrounds in business both internally and externally. Managers should deal with problems derived from cross-cultural issues and solve cross-cultural conflicts in an efficient and effective way. Cultural differences should be recognized, understood and encouraged. It should also be acknowledged that the culture concept is not limited to national culture, but also the ethnic, religious, gender, and professional cultures, to name just a few. Business practitioners should confront cultural differences, hold a new open perspective to reality and challenge themselves to cope with cross-cultural team or do business in the cross-cultural environment.*

Keywords: cross-cultural, conflict resolutions, Communication process

1. Introduction

In the world of accelerating globalization, managers have to deal with subordinates and coworkers from different cultural backgrounds in business both internally and externally. Managers should deal with problems derived from cross-cultural issues and solve cross-cultural conflicts in an efficient and effective way. Cultural differences should be recognized, understood and encouraged. It should also be acknowledged that the culture concept is not limited to national culture, but also the ethnic, religious, gender, and professional cultures, to name just a few. Business practitioners should confront cultural differences, hold a new open perspective to reality and challenge themselves to cope with cross-cultural team or do business in the cross-cultural environment. It should be admitted that cross-cultural teams do cause some problems. Plessis (2012) and Doucet, Jehn et al (2009) described conflicts in the cross-cultural team by citing the example of the operation of a Sino-US joint-venture. Waters argues, it is obvious that workforce from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds would experience conflicts, probably for the sake of team diversity itself. There are many cases about malfunctions of enterprises from cross-cultural conflicts. Consequences from poor management of conflicts in cross-cultural teams include high turnover rate, reduced productivity, poor communication, decreased morale among employees and poor cooperation. According to Grab (1996), negative influences also include stressful working environment, intense atmosphere, disbeliefs, and challenges to the current situation. Hermann, Carstarphen and Coolidge (1997) also remarked that the potential for conflict increases due to inevitable cross-cultural misunderstandings. In this article, sources of cross-cultural conflicts and management will be analyzed from Mayer's (2000) wheel model of conflicts, including communication process, emotion (especially anger and empathy), historical influence, inner value system and organizational cultures. There is no universal solution to cross-cultural conflicts, since perceptions of conflicts, and management strategies are heavily influenced by the participants' own cultures. Stella Ting-Toomey's (2005) Face-Negotiation Theory (FNT) will be stressed since it offers a new cross-cultural perspective toward conflict management with the introduction of face and

facework. Cross-cultural conflict resolutions will also be discussed.

To have a better understanding of cross-cultural conflict management, key concepts like cross-cultural management, cross-cultural conflicts should be clarified first. According to *Cross Cultural Management's* description, multicultural management covers global strategic management, strategies in multi-national enterprise, cross-cultural communication, work motivation and leadership in multi-cultural environment, company management and social issues in the global context etc. It is characteristic with multiple perspectives derived from different cultures instead of forced-adaptation to one traditional management. An effective cross-cultural management is defined by Lane, DiStefano and Mazneveski (2000) as utilizing cultural diversity to achieve good group performance. The MBI mode is often used to map cultural differences, to bridge communication across cultures, and to integrate the differences through management. A good manager for cross-cultural management is defined as who directs to identify, understand, and empathy with people from different cultural backgrounds.

Conflicts are defined as competition for similar rights, goals and resources (Augsburger, 1992). Mayer (2000) adds that they are due to unfriendly feelings and inconsistent worldviews. Dana (2001) specifically focuses on "workplace conflict". She argues that people's responsibilities should be independent, since employee will be angry when she thinks the other person is to be blamed for the conflict. This definition is particularly relevant to this research, "Conflict may be viewed as a feeling, a disagreement, and a real or perceived incompatibility of interests, inconsistent worldviews, or a set of behaviors"(Mayer, 2001a). Ting-Toomey applies the Face-Negotiation Theory to the classification of conflicts management styles, including avoiding, obliging, compromising, dominating and integrating.

Horowitz and Boardman's (1994) research shows that people from different cultures may attribute conflicts to different causes. For example, people from the relationship-oriented

culture may attribute conflicts to lack of courtesy, while those from the task-oriented culture may think that is because they have not done enough. Ting Toomey (2005) attribute causes of conflicts with participants' conflicting views of self and others' identity and face. Collectivism and individualism were also used to measure the influence of culture on facework cross-cultural communication (Triandis, 1996; Hofstede, 2001) In the individualistic culture, the individual identity and value are more valued, while group identity and value are more valued in the collectivistic culture. Mayer (2000) identifies six dynamics of conflicts, communication, emotions, history, structure and values as shown in the wheel of conflict. Mayer also stated, "Culture affects conflict because it is embedded in individuals' communication styles, history, ways of dealing with emotions, values, and structures." Sources of conflicts will be analyzed from the perspective of Mayer's conflict wheels in the context of cross-cultural management.

2. Communication Process

Communication is a complex process involving speaker and listener's use of language, perception of other cultures, ethnocentrism-tendency and identification of stereotypes. The effective use of language is the first key to communication. The very sounds of a different language can sometimes be insulting. Coleman (1995a) understood the difficulty of this type of situation when he stated that it is a stressful experience when learning how to work with some form of cultural diversity. Steyn (2001a) added that the attitudes which people attach to other languages cause major problems in communication. This is also true for those who find some language elements of another culture to be amusing or disgusting. It is common for people to attribute negative intentions in a cross-cultural situation when speakers begin using an unknown language. Perception is a critical issue in cross-cultural communication because meaning is partially determined by cultural orientation. In an ambiguous situation, it is easier to make a premature judgment than to withhold judgment. Ethnocentrism is another obstacle to successful communication. The belief that one's own culture is superior in every way than others contributes to lack of respect to speakers in other culture. Although stereotypes may be helpful during the early stage of encounter, those oversimplified perceptions may hinder further understanding of the other person as an individual rather than "being a member of a certain group". That is why many people have unrealistic expectations in personal interactions with someone from different cultural backgrounds.

Emotion: Anger and Empathy

Of emotions in the wheel of conflicts, anger is the most significant contributor while empathy is the conflicts resolver. With ethnocentrism and stereotypes in mind, participants may get angry when the other party does not fulfill their expectations. According to Horowitz and Boardman, perception of internationality influence employees in the cross-cultural team most. People choose to anger or empathy toward the offender. In turn, the choice of emotions may be the deciding factor in whether or not the conflict escalates or

de-escalates. In the multi-cultural environment, each participant should be tolerant to others' behaviors and suspend their judgment first.

3. Historical Dimensions

Historical issues like wars between countries, conflicts between ethnic groups, discrimination and segregations between African Americans and whites influence people's cognition, emotion and behavior. Employees in the multi-cultural team would inevitably bring their attitudes toward the other cultural group to individuals. Steyn (2001b) argued that developing individual close relationships are the best way to overcome the historical issues. Lingenfelter and Mayers (2000) added that the key in successful personal relationships is accepting the possibility that other people have viewpoints which are worthy of consideration. Multicultural organizations provide a good starting place for interaction between people of various backgrounds. Banks (2001) stated that these interactions will teach people to know, to care and to act in new and thoughtful ways. As relationships are approached with this positive attitude of learning, perceptions can be modified and behavior can be changed. Coleman (1995a) captured this idea, "As the range of an individual's personal contacts increase, so will the breadth and depth of the social ideas and models that will affect his or her behavior."

Inner value system

The identification of personal values and the values of others are important in across-cultural situation. Hermann, Carstarphen and Coolidge (1997) indicated that understanding values and assumptions may help to avoid the misinterpretation of behavior and intentions in across-cultural setting. Strydom made a stronger statement "....no value judgments are to be made under any circumstances whatsoever on the cultural aspect of communities."

Organizational structure

The wheel of conflict includes structure as another source of conflict. Mayer (2000) defined structure as the "external framework" of a conflict. Issues of structure encompass job-related items such as the organizational structure, the allocation of resources, and the actual setting of the interaction. Perhaps the structural elements are the least likely to be changed; however, conflict management may have to address these elements in an effort to help employees understand the situation. One of the structural issues concerned the distribution of work responsibilities in the office. According to Grab (1996), one of the sources of conflict in an organization is when someone makes an effort to control another person.

Cross-cultural conflict styles and strategies

Stella Ting-Toomey categorizes conflicts into five styles, avoiding, obliging, compromising, dominating and integrating. People from different cultures often have different styles. In the avoiding approach to conflicts, people tend to shun from disagreements and dodge from unpleasant topics. For example, they will state excuses like "I am busy",

“It is not a good time to talk about it” to stay away from conflicts. In the obliging style, people involved in the conflicts try to accommodate the other party by satisfying their demands. It is typical “whatever you do is fine with me.” In compromising, participants want to compromise their demands or gains to settle conflicts. In the dominating style, one party tends to use their advantages or authority to make decisions. In the integrating style, people tend to find solutions to problems. People from collectivistic culture tend to use avoidance and obliging strategies since they involve more face concern, while individualistic people prefer dominating style since it involves more about self-face need. Compromising and integrating styles involve mutual need (Ting-Toomey, 2006). It is generally believed that individualists tend to use more dominating/ confrontational styles to deal with conflicts, while collectivists prefer to use avoiding, compromising or obliging strategies.

However, this clear division of cultural behaviors has been subjected to many critiques. Even though these cultural preferences do exist, such generalizations cannot be taken as a predictor for an individual behavior in a given situation. Many studies have also made endeavors to show how situational factors and individual differences mediate the influence of cultural norms, values, and rules in an individual's communication behaviors.

Besides her work of using identity negotiation and face negotiation frameworks in interpreting cross-cultural conflicts, Ting Toomey and Oetzel (2001) also came up with a culture-based situational model, which incorporates cultural orientations, situational factors and behaviors into a whole.

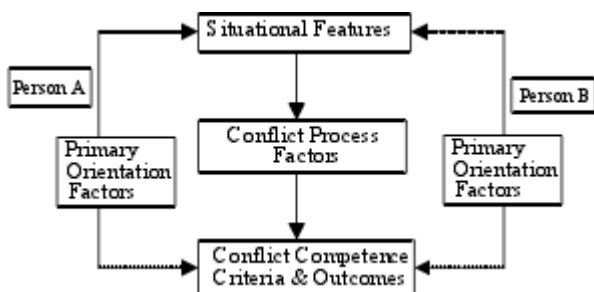


Figure 1: Culture-Based Situational Conflict Model
Source: Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, (2001). *Managing Intercultural Conflict Effectively*. CA: Sage

For conflicts management, primary orientation factors like cultural dimensions like individualism/collectivism; high/low power distance, restraint/ indulgent; high context/low context; long/short term orientation, personal attributes like independent/ dependent self-construal, communication behaviors (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Singlies & Brown, 1995), conflict norms like equity/communal norm as well as face concerns like face concern and face need should be taken into consideration. In the specific conflicts management, situational features like group perceptual boundaries, relationship parameters, and goal assessment should also be taken into consideration. Process factors like management styles, emotional expression, competence skills, and facework behaviors are also to be included. Participants'

perceptions of time and assessment of effectiveness should also be addressed.

With fast development of international business and globalization, the multicultural business organizations need to modify cultural strategies to win the competition. They not only need to appreciate existent cultural differences, but also deal with conflicts in the multi-cultural environment. Significance of cross-cultural conflicts management has won recognition from every aspect of society. Cultural diversity runs beyond national cultures to encompass sub-cultures, race, gender, disability, religious beliefs, sexual orientation and economic status. The prevalence of these issues makes diversity a management issue which can create new strengths in the business or break the business through strife and lawsuits. Employees, especially managers and leaders need new social skills, as well as cultural information, to effectively work with each other. Confronted with cross-cultural conflicts, managers can analyze the causes from Mayer (2000)'s wheel of conflicts, and adopt appropriate strategies under the guidance of culture-based situational conflict model with full consideration of participants' cultural orientations, situational factors, process factors as well as perceptions of time and outcome assessment.

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