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## Conflict Resolution Styles and Organisational Performance: The Mediating Role of Cultural Factor

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### Abstract

This conceptual paper provides the information on the exploration of conflict resolution styles (integrating, obliging, dominating, avoiding, and compromising) and culture (power distance, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, collectivism, and long-term orientation) and organisational performance of the Royal Malaysian Customs Department. This study proposes a relationship model of conflict resolution styles and organisational performance and mediating cultural factors for this department

**Keywords:** Conflict Resolution Styles, Cultural Factors, Organisational Performance, Strategic Management, Public Management

### Introduction

Conflict is associated with an environment of disagreement regarding ideas, values, concepts, beliefs, theories, philosophies or interests (Campbell & O'Leary, 2015). Conflict can also be described as a form of disagreement or frustration when values, ideas, or interests of different individuals or a team of people differ in achieving the set objectives. According to Bafarasat (2016), conflict is a strong disagreement between two or more interdependent parties when they perceive incompatible interests, viewpoints, processes, and goals in an interaction episode. On the other hand, Fitzgerald et al (2017) notes that conflict is an element of life, in organisations as well as in other areas of life; as people strive for jobs, resources, power, acknowledgment, and security. Dealing with conflict is hard because it incites primitive emotions like feeling threatened, which creates the classic stress response—fight or flight.

Conflict is also known as an inevitable part of organisational life since the goals of different stakeholders such as managers and staff are often incompatible (Lacity & Willcocks, 2017). To explain why conflict is inevitable, we should look at the concept of organisations in a larger environment which involves internal or external cross-cultural factors. Due to these factors, we will have some difficulties or face conflicts in delivering our ideas and interests when working together in a team or completing a provided task. This also includes making an important decision. Conflict is a healthy element in an organisation because it helps to improve and enhance the performance of the organisation. In any group or among individuals

who work together to generate ideas or creativity in coming out with solutions for a problem, there are obviously many different views that will cause conflicts. However, conflicts are needed to make better decisions in achieving the set objectives.

Conflict is functional because it helps with organisations' performance, and it also helps individuals in decision making. However, if conflicts are not managed well, they will create chaos, and this will lead to other negative impacts onto organisations. The image, values and morale of team members or employees will be affected. According to Lu and Wang (2017) conflict has always been with us, and it would be safe to argue that we expect it when people of different cultures, personalities, and expectations interact. Besides, they clearly state that individuals or groups within organisations often avoid any event of conflict. When there is a conflict, they intend to be quiet, or they just induce the event of conflict without being perceptive about it. In the event of the conflicts which are created unintentionally, this can lead to new knowledge. This also will lead to a healthy workplace and increase the chance of better quality of communication among team members when conflicts are resolved. In addition, conflicts can change people for betterment.

Conflict is seen as a "given", and our best expectation is to be able to "resolve" it or "reduce" it through the use of a variety of strategies, for example consensual approaches, third-party intervention and the famous "getting to yes" approach of (Fisher et al., 2011). Individual styles can be determined with the several approaches to manage the interpersonal conflicts. According to Rahim and Bonoma (1979) the most well-known approach is the Conflict Resolution Styles (CRS) which consists of integrating, obliging, dominating, avoiding and compromising. This basic model was initially adopted from Blake et al (1968), but then Rahim and Bonoma (1979) believed that it could be viewed from a different angle, elements of concern for self and others were added. According to Kools and George (2020), both communication and culture have a close relationship which can be explained in commonly shared things or meanings in both verbal and nonverbal messages that can be understood by senders and receivers of the same culture. Intracultural communication can best be defined as an exchange form of meaningful messages within the same group of people or individuals who share the same cultural context. Meanwhile, Gunkel et al (2016) believed that intracultural conflict can be easier to manage than cross-cultural conflict resolution styles. Cross-cultural conflict involves group or individuals from diversified backgrounds that have different thoughts, beliefs, opinions, and ideas in managing conflicts. Conflicts can occur without any prior notice or time due to the diversified backgrounds. Besides, conflicts can increase levels of stress, anger, and bias if their environment are not properly handled. Conflicts have advantages in helping organisations and people such as creating better ideas, solving problems, and creating healthy competitions. On the other hand, conflicts lead to lack of productivity and delay of tasks and affects organisations' performance. Besides, different cultures also play major roles in conflicts.

According to Caputo et al (2019) relationships are conceptualized by dominant factors and they are also associated with the way of people handle conflicts. This is because a culture itself portrays social norms that directly control interpersonal behaviours. Furthermore, values and individuals' perceptions and thoughts are also the influencing factors in this context. Therefore, in this study we will identify what is the Conflict Resolution Styles (CRS) and Culture (power distance, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, collectivism and long-term orientation) of individuals. Studies by Joo Kim et al (2015); Han et al (2018); Song et al (2018) Le (2017); Jang and Kim (2018) emphasise on the East Asian countries like China, Korea, Japan and Taiwan. Even though these studies provide sound findings about the conflict resolution

styles in Asia, the findings and the result can be challenged or might be different from other countries in Asia like Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore because they do not represent these countries.

This study is conducted to further understand and gather information about conflicts at workplace. Hence, the Royal Malaysian Customs Department was chosen for this study. As mentioned earlier, conflicts have advantages and disadvantages, hence it is up to the ability of individuals or groups to solve them. Conflicts are much about how individuals or groups manage them. There have been cases which organisations encourage conflicts to occur to generate more creative and innovative ideas and solutions. Conflicts are due to diversified cultures and demography factors in which individuals or groups are working in different perceptions and beliefs. The simple logic in conflicts is that people with different ideas, beliefs and perceptions tend to motivate conflicts to occur.

One notable event surrounding the Royal Malaysian Customs Department is the passage of the tax regime, which is still influencing the working style of customs officers and public administration as a whole (Kraal, 2019). This situation is an ironic example of the conflict situation faced by civil service that is immune to political retaliation, which would cause the customs officers to become the target of critics of the public sector (Sinnaiah, 2023). The conflictual relationship between customs officers, stakeholders, and possibly the public is crucial for the development of the nation economy and relevant for the public sector to actively manage this situation (Shonk, 2019). Conflict resolution could also be a proactive approach for the RMCD in establishing a positive relationship among the employees, stakeholders, and organisations, where workplace disputes could be an important factor in enhancing organisational performance (Sinnaiah, 2023).

According to academic scholars and academicians, a common method of perceiving conflict resolution styles is the best-fit approach to conflict management, where organisations abandon the totemic, one-size-fits-all approach (Beugelsdijk & Welzel, 2018). Instead, the goals and objectives of the conflict resolution styles are aligned with the goals and objectives of the organisation (Maiti & Choi, 2021). Therefore, the approach employed in this study would enhance the understanding of the practice that possibly links conflict resolution styles to organisational performances. Conflict could be explained in the form of a spiral idea. In this case, failure in managing the conflict properly would lead to predictable results with alarming issues, which include failure in information exchange, misleading of tasks among administration officers, and a sense of crisis (Chandler, 2018). Aremu et al (2021) highlighted that conflict resolution styles hold important roles between the planning process and organisational performance. To illustrate, this conflict is able to influence the relationship and could create a positive result, provided the strategic-level objectives for conflict resolution styles (resolution of micro-level conflict, decision making, and improvement in internal communication and organisational communication) are in line with organisational objectives (Alqershi et al., 2021). Royal Malaysian Customs Department is an important agency that determines indirect tax revenue for the nation with the involvement of decisions, considering that the decision-making process is the actual wellness of the nation economy (Sinnaiah, 2023). The organisation is involved in many events of the decision-making process in all shapes and sizes, including a critical and challenging situation to balance between economic and social welfare of the nation (Knight et al., 2020). The strategic planning involving these organisations features an economic value that would contribute to the performance of Malaysian trade and other facilities with other countries (Bartkus et al., 2021). Strategic planning involves a highly complex decision process that requires a fast track, considering that

this planning is a critical timely action for the economy to sustain itself competitively among other nations (Aminov et al., 2019). Therefore, the speed and comprehensiveness in the event of effective and efficient decision-making process are crucial for the Royal Malaysian Customs Department.

## Literature Review

### Conflict Resolution Styles (CRS)

Conflict can occur when people are required to participate in any task which does not match with their objectives or interests. Conflict also can be motivated by people's behavioural preferences in which others' behavioural patterns do not match with theirs. According to a study by Stadler (2019), there are discrepancies between resolution and conflict management that are more logical and significant. The main concept of conflict resolution is how to minimise, reduce and avoid conflicts from happening. Researchers have also explained the positive sides of conflicts which are reflected in organisational performance in terms of decision making and innovation. In addition, Vargas (2021) strongly believes that a conflict is not evil or negative to organisations but the way employees manage the conflict will cause either positive or negative impact to organisations' performance. Peters and Blomme (2019) state that conflicts at workplace are one of the most discussed and debated areas in terms of organizational theory and attitude. In the context of organisational research, conflicts management styles with were clearly explained by Blake et al. (1968) through their premier findings This research then explained a conceptual framework based on two dimensions which were concerns for people and production. Here the definitions of 'concern for' reflected the level of the concern and not the results.

Figure 1 illustrates the two variables and the possible combinations of these elements. Later it was further studied and discussed within the concept of managerial conflict. Ruble and Thomas (1976) redesigned the two-dimensional models into new dimensions which were assertiveness and cooperativeness. The study later identified the five (5) conflict resolution styles which consisted of competing, collaborating, avoiding, accommodating, and compromising. As mentioned earlier, the basic model was initiated by Blake et al. (1964) and later this model was adopted by (Filsecker et al., 2020) . The CRS model defines the dimensions to concern for self and to concern for others. The concern for self is explained as the level of self-satisfactions meanwhile the concern for others determines the level of satisfactions of the other person. Therefore, the outcome of this dimensions is themed five conflict management styles which are integrating, dominating, obliging, avoiding, and compromising.

Integrating involves concern of both individuals and groups, which means concern of the persons and others. This is usually used in groups or between other groups to create a win-win situation for all. Adding to this, the conflict which occur will be solved and the outcome will satisfy both groups' objectives and ideas. This will encourage positive relationship between both groups by eliminating the tension. This happens when openness and shared thoughts of the solution satisfy both parties and eventually, develop and maintain a good relationship (Filsecker et al., 2020). Dominating, this type of styles scores at the end of the scale which involves less concern on other parties and high concern on themselves. The individual or the group who adapt this style will focus more on strengthening themselves and their position to win in the conflict. They do not consider others' needs or concerns and prioritise themselves. They will conquer the conflict by forcing others to accept their thoughts or ideas. The layman term for this style is 'I win, you lose'. For goal orientation, this style

might be suitable and effective but it is also inappropriate because it takes full advantage of one's own needs at the expense of others (Filsecker et al., 2020). Obliging is the type of individual or groups who are highly concern with other parties rather than themselves. People who adapt this style focus more on the relationship than their own goals. Hence, they are more likely to be accepted and liked by others. They believe that conflicts should not occur and can be avoided to make relationships work. This style is also known as 'no win or no lose' (Filsecker et al., 2020). Avoiding means to avoid from a conflict and its environment. People who have this style will forgo their objectives, thoughts, and relationships because they will back off from issues or disagreements that are taking place. They also believe that it is far easier to let go than to face a conflict. Moreover, they can be labelled as having problem in facing the conflict, cannot accept the blame or pass the blame to others. This style can be summarised as having a mixture of withdrawing and avoiding from conflicts or to be 'lose-lose'. These people fail to accomplish their own needs and others (Filsecker et al., 2020). The final style is compromising which means individuals or groups have moderate level of concern for their own objectives and the relationships with others. People in this type of style will actively seek for a solution that satisfies both quarters. These people are also willing to let go their objectives or relationships to reach the mutual agreement for a good cause. This style also can be best defined as 'lose-win' or 'give and take' approach to make decisions easier (Filsecker et al., 2020).

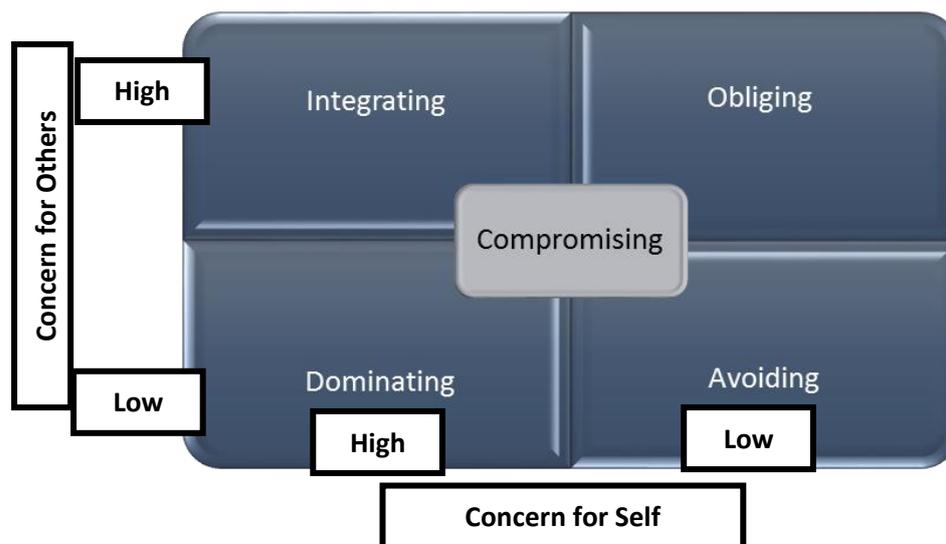


Figure 1 : Conflict resolution styles model

### Cultural Factor

Beugelsdijk and Welzel (2018) have explained that the combinations of dimensions within relationship have direct influence with the culture and this is reflected by how the individuals or groups resolve a conflict. This study has also revealed that the important dimensions in forming the interpersonal behaviours are the social norms which are parts of culture. Hence, individuals can be influenced by the dimensions such as values and self-construal. Beugelsdijk et al (2020) have also agreed that individuals or groups' communication and conflicts can be easily managed when there are dimensions of culture. Hofstede (1983) found that there are four dimensions that diversify the cultural values from the studies done. These four dimensions were later formed into a model consisted of power distance, individualism collectivism, masculinity femininity and uncertainty avoidance. This was the four initial

dimensions introduced in the context of national culture. Hofstede and Hofstede (2001) later added the fifth dimension which was long term orientation.

Power distance can best be defined as the way a culture deals with inequalities. In addition, power distance also means that individual or groups who have lower level of power, prestige, and wealth are willing to admit the prominently inequalities in terms of power distribution. Isfahani et al (2020) define power distance as “the extent to which less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally”. Collectivism points out on how people define themselves and the relationship with other parties. It is evident that collectivism also clearly shows how the interest of groups will overcome the interest of individuals. The employer-employee relationship is perceived in moral term like a family link, and hiring and promotion decisions take the employee’s in-group into account (Isfahani et al., 2020). Uncertainty avoidance is the extent to which people in a culture feel threatened by uncertain or unknown situations (Isfahani et al., 2020). They also explain that this type of feeling can be expressed through anxiety and stress that requires the needs of the predictability in terms of written or unwritten set of procedures. In these set of dimensions, all situations will be avoided by following a strict guideline on attitudes and behaviours and belief as the final say. Masculinity, self-confident and development which are the dominance of these values will be tested. Hofstede defines this culture dimensions as competition between women and men who struggle for high differences. Masculinity cultures that place high values on masculine traits stress assertiveness, competition and goal orientation (Isfahani et al., 2020). Long Term Orientation encourages thrift, savings, perseverance toward results, and a willingness to subordinate oneself for a purpose (Isfahani et al., 2020). This is the only dimension that has a direct relationship with the economic growth compared to the other four dimensions mentioned earlier which do not link or correlate with the economic growth. Long term orientation can be explained as the future expectation with motivation toward good values. This dimension is more focused and gives high priority on the future itself by emphasizing thrift.

### **Organisational Performance (OP)**

Organisational performance is the actual result of a firm that is measured based on strategic objectives. In other words, organisational performance can also be defined as the process of efficiency and effectiveness of action (Neely et al., 2005). On the other hand, Kaplan and Norton (2005) emphasise that organisational performance is the prerequisite of performance improvement. In these studies, Balanced Scorecard was utilized in quantifying the public sector performance as it facilitated financial and non-financial aspects of organisational performance and covered all four measurement perspectives consisted of financial perspective, customer perspective, internal business process perspective, and learning and growth perspective of non-profit organisations (Adam et al., 2018; Tsai et al., 2020). Performance measurement is a systematic series of mechanism to identify the effectiveness and efficiency of peoples’ behaviours, and it is also known as a setting in order for the people to perform their utmost abilities. Alatailat et al (2019) describe that performance measurement can illustrate organisational performance, a unit, a department, or even the business process and many other areas. Therefore, it gives the conceptualisation that there is a structural relationship between organisational performance and performance measurement. The solution for performance measurement might require substantive and relevant restructuring toward the input resources and processes that will be aligned with the

current system to increase the productivity level or performances (Garengo & Sardi, 2021). Failure in analysing the performance measures will weaken the organisational strength and drain the organisations' efforts (Alosani et al., 2019).

### Research Methodology

The study will employ a quantitative method. The population of this study is the randomly selected officers from the Royal Malaysian Customs Department. These officers hold various roles and positions in the department and are stationed in Selangor, Wilayah Persekutuan Putrajaya and Wilayah Persekutuan Kuala Lumpur. To achieve the main objective of this study, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) approach will be employed. SEM using AMOS 21.0 will be used to test the measurement model. In this study, the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 21.0 will be utilised to analyse the preliminary data and provide descriptive analyses such as mean score, standard deviation, and frequency.

### A Proposed Conceptual Model

To understand the relationship of conflict resolution styles, organisational performance and mediating cultural factors for the Royal Malaysian Customs Department, a proposed conceptual framework model for this study is shown in Figure 2.

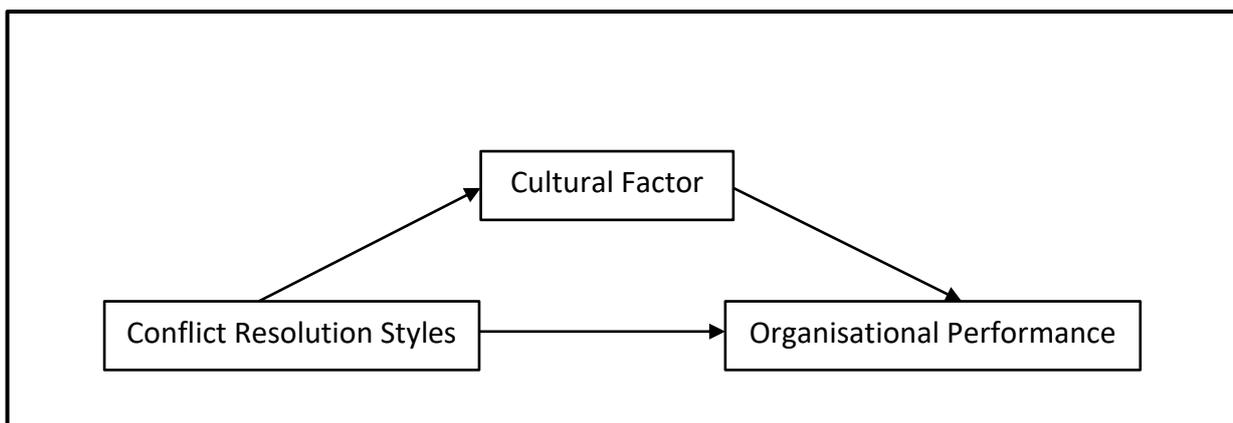


Figure 2. The Proposed Conceptual Model

### Conclusion

A conceptual model has been proposed to review the relationship between Conflict Resolution Styles, Organisational Performance and mediating Cultural Factors of the Royal Malaysian Customs Department. Hopefully, the proposed conceptual model can enhance the understanding and determine the influencing factors of conflict resolution styles and cultural for this department. It is also believed that the findings of this study can increase the visibility of the public administration sector in Malaysia and contribute valuable extended knowledge among academicians and practitioners. Further research can be conducted among other enforcement agencies in Malaysia so that academicians, practitioners, and policy makers are able to restructure more vibrant and holistic strategic plans for these agencies.

### Contributions

Conflict management always an interesting domain to can contribute for new management approach that can create many interesting phenomena that yet to be explored under its wide range of rubric. The aim of this conceptual paper was to provide reflections towards academic

scholars in developing review article in conflict management, especially in the domains of public services. Even though, there are several articles on conflict management towards organisational performance in developing conceptual articles, the reflections have indicated there are scarce knowledge in the field of indirect tax agencies. Our discussion and the reflections in these articles are built upon five features of conflict management styles (integrating, dominating, obliging, avoiding, and compromising) that should be conveyed in the positioning of conceptual articles and the articulation of their contributions. Overall, the author believes that the efforts to provide reflections on review article in conflict management styles, as this will enhanced and encouraged the readers to be more reflective about their theorizing.

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