

Managerial Level Differences on Conflict Handling Styles of Managers in Thai Listed Firms

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Abstract

This study aimed to compare the differences of managerial levels on preference for conflict handling styles of managers in Thai listed firms. Data were collected from 76 managers who worked at the companies listed in Stock Exchange of Thailand 100 by using modified version of conflict handling styles questionnaire as the instrument. The results of multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) indicated the significant differences among managerial level groups on a linear combination of the five conflict handling styles (Wilk's $\Lambda = .72$, $F(10, 138) = 2.50$, $p < .05$, multivariate $\eta^2 = .15$). Analysis of variance (ANOVA) showed the significant difference in competing style. Using Turkey HSD test for pairwise comparison revealed statistically significant differences between first-line managers and top managers indicating that first line managers reported significantly lower preference for competing style than top managers. Limitations and recommendations for further studies were also discussed.

Keywords: *Conflict Handling Styles, Managerial Levels, Thai Listed Firms*

Introduction

Organizational conflict arises when individuals or groups perceived incompatible goals, interests, or value, and they attempt to thwart the other parties to accomplish their goals (Jones & George, 2016). Conflict is perceived as an inevitable part of working environment as managers and employees either the same department or different departments interdependently work together to achieve the goals. The interactions between managers and employees can lead to the different types of conflict in organizations including interpersonal, intragroup, intergroup, and interorganizational conflicts. Poorly handling conflict in organizations may cause suffering performance. Effectively managing conflict in an optimal level, on the other hand, can lead to effective organizational performance. Thus, managers and employees are idealistically required to have sufficient conflict management skill in order to handle conflict in the workplace properly. However, in reality, individuals dominantly hold the different conflict handling styles based on their background, perception, attitude, personality, and status (DuBrin, 2009; Robbins & Judge, 2016). In organizations, individuals who work in the different managerial levels may be influenced by the work environment, the nature of task, job demand, the number of subordinates, and conflict partners to perform the different conflict handling styles. Thus, knowing which style is the dominant style of managers who work in the

different levels is a vital key to effective conflict management in the workplace. In addition, the previous research examined the different conflict handling styles preferences across hierarchical levels (Simmons, 1996; Brewer et al., 2002; Özkalp et al., 2009). Also, the study on the relationship between managerial levels and conflict management styles in Thai context that placed an emphasis on managers who worked in Thai listed firms was scant and needed to be explored to increase the body of knowledge in this field. Therefore, this study aims to explore managerial level differences on conflict handling styles of managers in Thai listed firms.

Literature Reviews

Thomas and Kilman (1974) identified five major styles of conflict management. Each style is based on the combination of assertiveness and cooperativeness. If managers have high concern for themselves and low concern for others, which means they desire to achieve their own concerns at the cost of the other party. Managers with this personality tend to prefer the **competing style**. On the other hand, if managers are more likely to satisfy the other's concerns rather than their own concerns, they have tendency to prefer the **accommodating style**. If managers have a moderate desire on their own concerns and others' or the halfway of cooperative and assertive personality, this reflects the **compromising style**. If managers are willing to fully satisfy the desires of all parties, which reflects high assertiveness and high cooperativeness, managers tend to prefer the **collaborating style**. In contrast, if managers have low concerns for themselves and others, this reflects the **avoiding style**. Previous research on conflict management styles of individuals who were in the different hierarchical levels showed the significant differences between managers and non-managers (Simmons, 1996; Brewer et al., 2002); however, some studies found no significant differences of conflict handling styles according to managerial levels (Vokić & Sontor, 2009).

Simmons (1996) compared conflict management styles of individuals who had different management experiences. Multivariate analysis of variance was used to compare the differences among leaders and non-leaders. The results found the significant differences on two conflict resolution styles, which were avoiding style and collaborating style. Participants with leadership experience had a higher tendency to prefer the collaborating style and a lower tendency to prefer the avoiding style. In addition, Brewer et al. (2002) studied the comparison between non-managers and managers in conflict management styles preferences. One-hundred and eighteen employees both male and female in three different financial institutions were involved in this study. They were asked to complete the ROC-II to describe their own conflict handling style. The results showed that the differences of preferred conflict handling styles between upper organizational status and lower organizational status. The managers were found to score higher in collaborating style and score lower in avoiding style. Furthermore, Özkalp et al. (2009) studied 130 Turkish managers in different sectors including durable consumer goods, aviation, automotive, and banking to determine conflict management styles. The ROC-II was used to assess Turkish manager's conflict management styles. The results found that integrating style (collaborating style) and compromising style were the first and second most preferred conflict styles of Turkish managers. Findings also indicated that preferring obligating style changed based on the status of managers. Managers tended to prefer obliging

style mostly when conflict party had an upper level status. However, the findings of Vokić and Sontor (2009) did not support the previous research. Their study examined the relationship between characteristics of Croatian employees including gender, age, level of education, field of work, hierarchical level, marital status, and parenthood, and conflict management styles. This study used the 20-item of PCHS (Preferred Conflict-Handling Style) instrument developed by Robbins in 2006 as the questionnaire to gather the data from 116 Croatian employees. However, this study failed to report the validity and reliability of instrument, which indicated the weaknesses of this study's research methodology. To focus on the hierarchical level, the findings showed no significant differences of conflict handling styles among non-managerial employees, low level managers, middle managers, and top managers.

Although many evidences empirically demonstrated the significant differences of conflict handling styles between managers and non-managers, some studies found the contradictory results. As shown in the previous studies, the findings of the preference in conflict management styles of people with different managerial levels were seemingly different based on the size of organizations, the cultural differences, and contexts. As a consequence, the hypothesis of this study was proposed as "the different conflict handling styles of managers in Thai listed firms were affected by managerial levels."

Methodology

This study was a descriptive study. Simple random sampling technique was used for data collection. The name of listed companies in Stock Exchange of Thailand was randomly selected from the pool. There were five listed companies finally selected for data collection. Prior to distributing online questionnaires to the managers in all levels who worked in each firm through their email address, the researcher contacted the HR managers of each company for the permission to collect data. Data collection was conducted in May-July 2016. After the deadline was met, only seventy-six questionnaires were returned with completion. For the instrument, the modified version of conflict handling style questionnaire was developed based on the concepts of Rahim (2001) and Thomas and Kilmann (1974). Thai translated version of this questionnaire consisted of 28-item encompassing five different conflict handling styles (Promsri, 2013). To ensure the validity of this instrument, the index-objective congruence (IOC) was used to evaluate the content validity of each item of the scale by three experts in management field. The results of evaluation indicated that no item of this scale had score lower than 0.5, which was acceptable and considered being valid. Also, the internal consistency of this instrument was measured with Cronbach's alpha. The total scale of reliability coefficient was 0.914, which was highly acceptable (Nunnally, 1978).

Results

As of seventy-six managers in different levels of selected Thai listed firm who completed the questionnaires, there were 39 male managers (51.3%) and 37 female managers (48.7%). A half of them aged between 31-40 years (50%). For their educational levels, more than a half of managers hold master's degree (51.3%). For management levels, the findings found that more than a half of respondents were a first-line manager (57.9%), the rest of them was a middle

manager (30.3%), and a top manager (11.8%), respectively. According to work experience, this study found the equal responses between less than 5 years of work experience (30.3%) and 5-10 years (30.3%). The rest of them worked more than 15 years (21.1%), and about 11-15 years (18.4%), respectively. Table 1 showed mean scores and standard deviation of five conflict handling styles. The results demonstrated that 'collaborating style' received the highest mean score ($\bar{x} = 3.94$, S.D. = .663) compared to other conflict handling styles. The second highest mean score was 'compromising style' ($\bar{x} = 3.87$, S.D. = .690) following by 'accommodating style' ($\bar{x} = 3.50$, S.D. = .700), 'avoiding style' ($\bar{x} = 3.49$, S.D. = .699), and 'competing style' ($\bar{x} = 3.30$, S.D. = .715), respectively.

Table 1 Mean and Standard Deviation of Different Conflict Handling Styles

Conflict Handling Styles	Mean	S.D.	Rank
Collaborating Style	3.94	.663	1
Competing Style	3.30	.715	5
Accommodating Style	3.50	.700	3
Compromising Style	3.87	.690	2
Avoiding Style	3.49	.699	4

To test research hypothesis, MANOVA was used. However, to ensure that multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was appropriate for data analysis, the basic assumptions of using MANOVA were conducted. The Box's Test of Equality of Covariance Matrices tested the assumption of homogeneity of covariance across the group using $p < .001$ as a criterion. The results showed significant differences between covariance metrics as Box's M (40.001) was not significant ($p = .325$). Thus, the assumption was not violated and Wilks' Lambda was an appropriate test to use. Next, Wilk's Lambda test indicated the significant differences among managerial level groups on a linear combination of the five dependent variables (Wilk's $\Lambda = .72$, $F(10, 138) = 2.50$, $p < .05$, multivariate $\eta^2 = .15$). The multivariate $\eta^2 = .15$ indicated that approximately 15% of multivariate variance of the dependent variables was associated with the group factor (See Table 2). In addition, the Levene's Test of Equality of Error Variance was tested to check the assumption of MANOVA that the variances of each variable were equal across the groups. The Levene's Test indicated that all dependent variables were not significant (collaborating style, $p = .582$, competing style, $p = .683$, accommodating style, $p = .949$, compromising style, $p = .457$, and avoiding style, $p = .812$), which meant that the assumption was met.

Table 2 Multivariate Tests

Effect		Value	F	Hypothesis df	Error df	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Intercept	Pillai's Trace	.973	496.179	5.000	69.000	.000	.973
	Wilks' Lambda	.027	496.179	5.000	69.000	.000	.973
	Hotelling's Trace	35.955	496.179	5.000	69.000	.000	.973
	Roy's Largest Root	35.955	496.179	5.000	69.000	.000	.973
Management	Pillai's Trace	.295	2.419	10.000	140.00	.011	.147
	Wilks' Lambda	.717	2.498	10.000	138.00	.009	.153
	Hotelling's Trace	.379	2.576	10.000	136.00	.007	.159
	Roy's Largest Root	.330	4.619	5.000	70.00	.001	.248

As a result, the main effects of independent variables needed to be processed for further evaluation respectively. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) showed the significant difference in competing style ($F = 4.00$, $p < .023$) (See Table 3).

Table 3 Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Source	Dependent Variable	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Squares	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	Collaborating	1.384	2	.692	1.598	.209	.042
	Competing	3.786	2	1.893	3.997	.023	.099
	Accommodating	.522	2	.261	.527	.593	.014
	Compromising	.336	2	.168	.709	.709	.009
	Avoiding	1.380	2	.690	.247	.247	.038
Intercept	Collaborating	815.100	1	815.100	1882.817	.000	.963
	Competing	608.844	1	608.844	1285.686	.000	.946
	Accommodating	609.263	1	609.263	1227.703	.000	.944
	Compromising	763.587	1	763.587	1571.547	.000	.956
	Avoiding	593.305	1	593.30	1225.688	.000	.944
Managerial Levels	Collaborating	1.384	2	.692	1.598	.209	.042
	Competing	3.786	2	1.893	3.997	.023*	.099
	Accommodating	.522	2	.261	.526	.593	.014
	Compromising	.336	2	.168	.345	.709	.009
	Avoiding	1.380	2	.690	1.426	.247	.038
Error	Collaborating	31.603	73	.433			
	Competing	34.570	73	.474			
	Accommodating	36.227	73	.496			
	Compromising	35.469	73	.486			
	Avoiding	35.336	73	.484			
Total	Collaborating	1213.816	76				

	Competing	869.960	76				
	Accommodating	966.583	76				
	Compromising	1171.188	76				
	Avoiding	963.056	76				
Corrected Total	Collaborating	32.987	75				
	Competing	38.355	75				
	Accommodating	36.750	75				
	Compromising	35.805	75				
	Avoiding	36.716	75				

The pairwise comparison was processed by using Turkey HSD test. Table 4 revealed statistically significant differences between first-line managers and top managers indicating that first line managers ($\bar{x} = 3.15$) reported significantly lower preference for competing style than top managers ($\bar{x} = 3.84$).

Table 4 Post Hoc Test for Competing Style with Turkey HSD

Competing Style	\bar{x}	First-line Manager	Middle Manager	Top Manager
		3.15	3.39	3.84
First-line Manager	3.15	-	-0.24	-0.69*
Middle Manager	3.39	0.24	-	-0.45
Top Manager	3.84	0.69*	0.45	-

Conclusion, Discussion, and Recommendations

This study aimed to examine the differences of conflict handling styles of managers in the different managerial levels. The findings showed that managers in Thai listed firms had a high score in collaborating and compromising styles, respectively. On the other hand, the managers were reported to have a low score in competing style. Findings of this present study were consistent with Özkalp et al. (2009) who found collaborating and compromising styles to be the most preferred conflict management styles of Turkish managers. Also, these findings partially supported the previous studies of Simmons (1996) and Brewer et al. (2002) who reported a high score of managers in collaborating style and a low score in avoiding style. However, based on the present study's findings, Thai managers were less likely to prefer competing style as Thai culture socialized people to think and care of others as well as oneself. However, multivariate analysis of variance indicated the significant differences in competing style. The pairwise comparison revealed statistically significant differences between first-line managers and top managers indicating that first line managers reported significantly lower preference for competing style than top managers. This finding was inconsistent with the study of Vokić and Sontor (2009). The reason that first-line managers were less likely to prefer competing style than top managers was the need to achieve organizational goals through their employees. If they were unable to win employees' hearts by taking care of employees' concerns and satisfying their desires, they were less likely to accomplish the goals. On the other hand, top managers were in the highest level of organizations, and necessarily needed to take all

responsibilities when organizations confronted the problems. They needed to ensure that everything would be on the right track when quick decisions needed to be made. Also, as they were in the top of hierarchy, they might have thought that they had more authorities and power to control the others, thus they tended to prefer competing style more than first-line managers.

This study had some limitations. Firstly, the sample size was very small and not sufficient to generalize the findings, thus the expansion of the future study is needed. Secondly, as this study solely focused on managerial level variables, the future study should focus on other organizational variables. Lastly, this study attempted to focus on listed firms in Stock Exchange of Thailand without sorting the sizes, thus the comparative study of conflict handling styles between managers and non-managers in the different sizes of organizations should be investigated in the future study. For the research implication, seminars and practical workshops relating to conflict management should be delivered to all levels of Thai managers in the listed firms to learn the advantages and the appropriateness of using preferred conflict handling styles for the improvement of organizational effectiveness and performance.

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