

Use of Personality for Managing Conflicts to Increase the Productivity in Sri Lankan Food Processing Sector

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Introduction

Organizational conflict is considered as legitimate, inevitable, and even a positive indicator of effective organization management (Rahim, 2002). Organizational conflict occurs when members engage in activities that are incompatible with those of colleagues within their network, members of other collectives, or unaffiliated individuals who utilize the services or products of the organization (Roloff, 1987). Conflict management is the practice of identifying and handling conflict in a sensible, fair and efficient manner (Ma, 2003). It is now recognized that conflict within certain limits is essential to productivity. Conflict management involves designing effective macro-level strategies to minimize the dysfunction of conflict and enhancing the constructive functions of conflict in order to enhance learning and effectiveness in an organization (Rahim, 2002).

The most accepted model for conflict management has been designed by Thomas in 1976 (Ma, 2003). He identifies five different conflict handling styles based on two dimensions. They are Assertiveness and Cooperativeness (Figure 1).

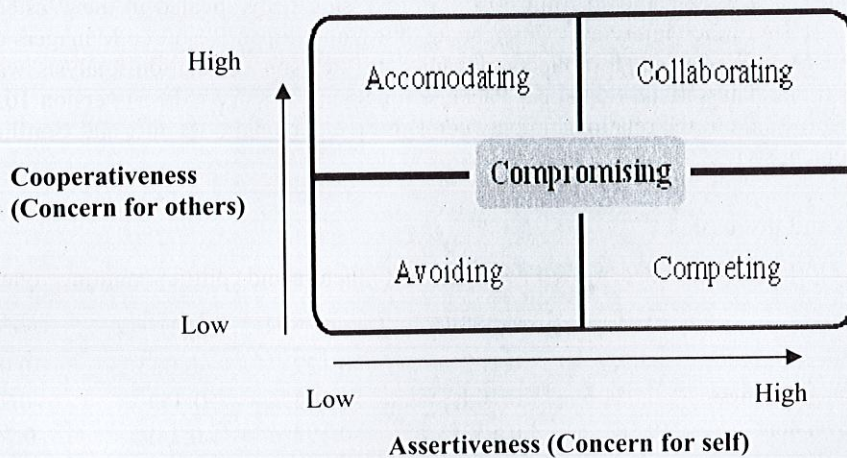


Figure 1: Two dimensional model of Conflict Handling Styles

Conflict styles refer to specific behavioral patterns that one prefers to employ when addressing conflict situations (Ma, 2003). Early studies supported a relationship between personality dimensions and the five styles of handling interpersonal conflict, while others have reported weak relationships between personality and styles of conflict handling (Ma and Kao, 2008).

When considered the Sri Lankan food processing sector, it can be categorized into a large number of sub sectors including fresh fruit and vegetables, poultry/meat, processed meat and fish, dairy products, biscuit and confectionary, bakery and flour

based products, non-alcoholic beverages, and coconut products etc. Total contribution of the sector to GDP is 8.4billion (Anon, 2010). There are approximately 100,000 people are employed in agro-industrial and food processing industries (Sellaheewa, 2009) and it is accounted 24.2% of the total workforce offering immense employment opportunities emphasizes the importance of food processing sector to the economy of the country. However, the presence of conflicts result in high labour turnover, job dissatisfaction and declined productivity in the food processing sector as in any other sector. According to the statistics of department of labour, fifteen strikes were recorded including food processing sector in 2010 (Anon, 2010). The objective of this study was to find out how the productivity of food processing sector can be increased by revealing the relationship between personality and individuals, preferred conflict managing styles.

Methodology

The study was conducted in two phases. During the first phase, a pilot survey was carried out to find out the background of conflicts and conflict management strategies practiced in food processing sector, using a sample consisting of twenty workers. A structured questionnaire was used to collect data needed to measure the personality and the conflict management styles. The scales developed by Thomas and Kilmann were used to measure conflict resolution styles (Ma, 2003) and modifying it into five point Likert scale. Further, International Personality Inventory (IPI) measuring Big Five personality factors developed by Goldberg (Ma, 2003) was used in this study to measure the respondents' personality. Sample was selected using random sample technique. Data were gathered from 60 food processing firms located in the Western province. Face to face interviews were carried out with Human Resource Managers or Decision Makers in order to collect relevant data. Pearson correlation analysis was applied to the data set and Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 16.0 was used to find out the relationship between Big Five personality factors and Conflict Management styles.

Results and discussion

Table 1: Relationship between Big Five personality factors and conflict handling styles

	Avoiding	Accommodating	Compromising	Collaborating	Competing
Openness	0.078	0.102	-0.122	-0.083	-0.047
Conscientiousness	-0.051	0.104	-0.103	0.454*	-0.261
Extraversion	-0.164	0.132	-0.192	0.349	-0.393*
Neuroticism	0.268	0.315	-0.453*	-0.012	-0.148
Agreeableness	-0.411*	-0.003	-0.067	0.393*	-0.209

Significant at 5% level

Agreeableness had significant association with avoiding and collaborating conflict handling styles. Neuroticism was significantly related with compromising conflict style while collaborating had significant association with conscientiousness. Significant relationship was observed between competing and extraversion personality factors (Table 1).

Results suggest that neuroticism had negative relationship with compromising style, meaning that people high in neuroticism are less likely to have compromising preferences for conflict handling. Extraversion was negatively related to competing style. Extraversion predicts the level of individual impact on group interaction. Agreeableness had positive relationship with collaborating style. Agreeable persons are sympathetic, helpful, and cooperative. Avoiding means low concern for self and low concern for others as well. The outcome of this study confirmed that agreeableness had negative impact on avoiding style. Conscientiousness was positively related to collaborating style. Conscientiousness reflects being dutiful, thorough, responsible, and self-disciplined. Empirical studies support the fact that conscientiousness is generally not related to any of the conflict styles. Openness was not found related to any of the conflict styles studied here.

Conclusions

The major contribution of this study is the empirical evidence that provides for a relationship between the personality, and the conflict handling styles adopt by food processing sector of Sri Lanka. The study proves that this relationship can be used to enhance the productivity of the sector by hiring right person to the right place at the right time.

The findings suggest that extraversion, agreeableness, neuroticism, and conscientiousness are the four most important personality factors in the Big Five that predict conflict styles. The most frequently used conflict handling style among managers was compromising. Research gives evidence that the predominant style among population is compromising. The most prominent personality factor was extraversion. It reveals that people by their nature are assertive. The results of this study have implications for conflict practitioners such as Human Resource managers. Big Five personality assessment helps to make decisions about training for improvement in conflict resolution skills. With the knowledge of the relationship between personality and conflict styles, training could help individuals understood how their own personality is related to a preference for a particular style of handling conflicts.

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